Sulfur 10

FEATURING: ENGAGING IN THE IMPOSSIBLE
BY LAURA (RIDING) JACKSON ■ THE NAP BY PAUL CHRISTENSEN
JACK SPICER'S LETTERS TO ALLEN JOYCE
MARJORIE PERLOFF ON AMY CLAMPITT

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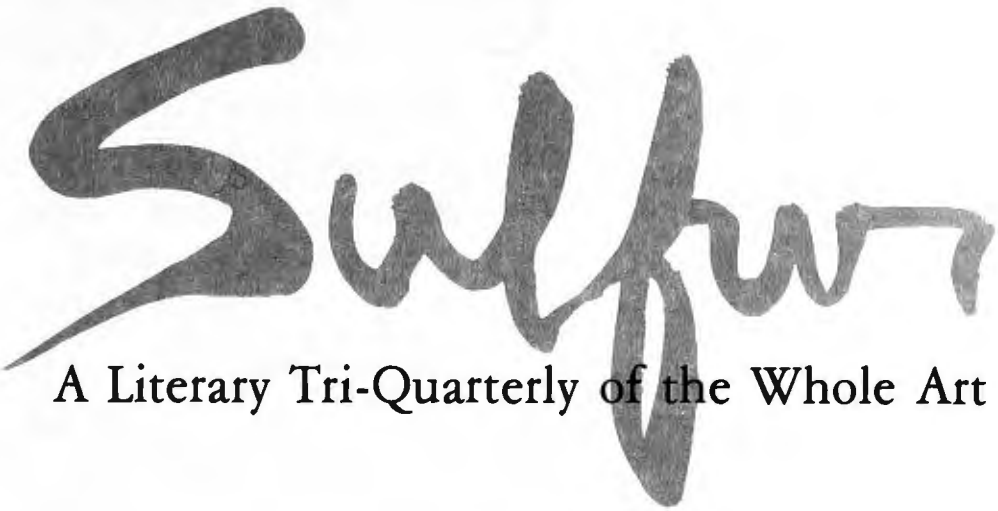

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Laura (Riding) Jackson

ENGAGING IN THE IMPOSSIBLE

My concern, in my writing on my experience (of close to sixty years) of the constitution and temper of the world of twentieth-century literary enterprise, is not to tell a life-story—to supply a professional autobiographical history as a subjective counterpart to biographical versions of my life-story. Such a subjective-objective categorization of viewpoints I regard as based on a fallacious conception of the nature of intellectual honesty. Two honesties are hypothesized in it, the second having attributed to it a purer character, as honesty, the first appraised as necessarily colored with the viewer's ideas of himself, or herself, limiting the account given of the *subject* of interest, or *object* of interest, or curiosity, to interpretation that excludes what others giving an account of it might report of it from an impersonal, unprejudiced judgement-vantage. I regard all that goes into the formation of an "objective" interpretation of material of event or fact as a generalizing of a variety of conjectured possible personal interpretations—an artificially construed consensus.

All telling about a person, whether by that person, or by others, is necessarily personal: it is what the "I" or "I" or "I" of each particular telling offers as

true. The biographer "I" offers a telling, as a true telling, of the entire life-story of his subject, to the extent of his knowledge. There is always the problem, in judging a biography *as truth*, of evaluating, under the extent of its knowledge-basis, the degree of purity of the biographer's feelings towards his subject: is he all-free or not all-free in his disposition towards it of processes of telling determined by ideas of himself—where his feelings ought to be determined entirely by ideas of *it* in undivided emotional preoccupation with it? Biographical telling can go wrong in its trying to mingle truth about the subject of the telling with what the biographical narrator is moved to inject into it as truth about himself—and, as biographical narrators can be tempted to include in their tellings, an extended truth representing ideas of themselves of persons of a kind with whom they are pleased to feel identity in their biographer-disposition towards their subject. In autobiographical telling there can be injecting into the narrative reports of ideas of the autobiographical teller about himself that constitute for him a complete, a final truth to which he feels historical narrative will tend to do injustice. This stretched truth told by a person about himself can never be so untrue, I think, as biographers' truth in which the motive of justice to the subjects is compounded with a compulsion of justice-doing by the narrators to themselves—and to varieties of opinions of things presumed to match their own.

I am not plagued by anxious desires to get my life-story set down by myself as if before a death-time that might leave it at the mercy of objectivist arbitrary truth-formulations. I believe that the sense of my being what and who I am, and doing as I have done and do, will become perfectly clear, as I believe that the meaning of all being and doing must become, as we proceed in this human course of being and doing that is framed in our minds' framing of all that is in the language of an all-illuminating of reason of things we have hardly yet dared to speak.

However it goes as to the clarification of what there is to be, do, know, understand, and tell, I have something to tell about myself that has pertinance to the general human need of comprehending how much of what human beings set themselves to be and do next, and next, as in an ever-new immediate that extends all past being and doing towards possible fullnesses of being and doing, builds itself over and over into barriers against this fullness. What human beings have been and have done solidifies stone-like into protective walls that stop

them in their trials of the possible to be and do, as at a safety-mark in knowledge and understanding: this is a line of necessity laid down for them by the urgencies of self-contentment. A necessity of self-contentment has steadily prevailed over the rule of the twin necessities of knowledge and understanding, in this late century's version of the continual human abrogation of the insistence of these ultimately undisregardable necessities which are at the center of the human mind's acceptance of its reality as the substance of human identity.

A climax of consciousness of an impotence laid upon human beings of fulfilling the expectations that human identity excites has gripped the sense of common identity that collects human beings into a loose summary of themselves as constituting "a world"; it is a climax of far-gone confusion in ideas of the nature of existence, and of human existence. A philosophy of failure of existence in the large pairs itself with a religion of success of human existence in the small—as kinds of being and doing, kinds of knowledge and understanding, pieces of a world of human consciousness of existence. Thus, human beings come to live their thinking life in pieces, amidst ruins of ever-outlived thought; and nothing has the clarity of full-minded occupation of the immediately existent, all is either ruin, or is undergoing weathering in the historical climate of ruin. It was with such a clarifying light that literature was supposed to touch the scenes of new thinking on what had been, was, and might be, a light of new truth cast in new telling.

Literature has played a double rôle in the drama of human hope of the human. It has served as the muse of the purest, the most purely human, of human ambitions, that of success in the objective that is the essential concern of the human mind: fullness of achievement of the possible in personal being and doing within the forms of knowledge and understanding natural to the mind. Among the varied fields of ambitious human activity, it was set apart, and set itself apart, as one in which human minds could devote themselves unreservedly to the expanding, towards the full of expressive witness-bearing to it, of the experience of knowledge and understanding of existence that is both the fact and the meaning of human existence. But literature has also had a rôle of beguiling the mind with inducements to *letting time pass* in operations of self-contenting deferment of full intellectual realization of the human experience of existence: it has served as a protector of experimentation in an intellectual do-nothing-ism that could not count as failing the supreme human ambition

because it allowed theoretically for its fulfilment. The Classical and the Romantic actually merge into a meaningless equivalence in literature, and, with them, the practical and the theoretical in conception of the humanly possible—the theoretically possible kept at temporal remove by the operations of literary imagination, settling more and more ponderously on the literary horizon of human life as the image of a literarily revered impossible.

My own involvement in literature was an attempt to resolve the ambiguity of its two rôles in a conception of it as having, as a function of an intellectually, spiritually, and *linguistically*, integrated character, a potentially saving effect of clarifying to the human mind the fundamental motives of its thought-engagements and the embodiment of them in words. These memoirs are being written to depict the exaggerated replica of the ordinary world of demoralized human ambition that the world of literary understanding became in its progressive adapting itself to the moral temporizings of a humanity advancing in a wisdom of incertitude of the value of humanness, or of anything. For all the dwelling in them on my experiences as one who tried to cast her life-undertaking within the frame of literary undertaking, I do not make report of these experiences for their interest as a personal narration: the personal element in my report is incidental to consideration I mean to give, and to ask to be given, to the conditions of human purpose that make up the world of literary undertaking of our time. The sense of these conditions is such that they exclude involvement in literature where the name "literature" is construed as comprising interests and purposes of worded thought that are literally—practically, not theoretically —of humanly comprehensive importance, performances of the mind directed towards the fully possible in human possession of the power of truth.

What I tell is not a life-story in literary-world setting strung upon a theme of ugly treatment long and widely visited upon me, a narrative patchwork of complaints. I am no disappointed literary careerist! I offer here what is necessary for the eventual understanding of my life in its literary-world aspects of experience and activity as the life of one soul-bent, mind-intent, on pressing towards answer-point the question we are all confronted with by ourselves in our nature of beings existing as minds.

Where does possibility, that knowledge bounds, end, and impossibility begin? How much is it of the possible, to be knowingly? What is it, to be mind, deter-

miner of the possible, the impossible, in being what, who, one is? In assuming literature to be the common ground of our asking and trying to answer this all-embracing question-and-answer devolvement upon us as truth of ourselves, the beings we personally are, and truth at once of being, which is inseparably all that is, I responded to my sense of the veridicality of the human mind. Literature: was it not meant to be the where of our telling what we are, who, and how much—and the whole story of the nature of the possible and the impossible? My report of how I came to know literature to be no common telling-ground but a process of continually gathering and continually dissolving resolves to try what can be told, the name excusing all the forms of cowardice and dalliance that it takes under its proud wing, should make it easier to find the place of common bravery for the telling of what is in being and in our being to tell.

2

I shall especially here present the part that the fact of poetry had for me in my adoption of literature as the ground of my trial of my powers of touching, in the reaches of mind that materialize it into words, the limit of the possible—the possible in letting one's being tell being's truth rather than appropriating language's uses of revelation for the truths of passing lives that selves living as mere self merely live. Poetry brought into view—into stark view—the debate of human consciousness with itself on what is possible and what impossible, in attainment to knowledge of the nature of our being—knowledge making the underlying, overlying, all-intervening fact of being familiarly (humanly, personally) understandable. The debate is inherently only an indeterminate of variant ideas on the possibility or impossibility of realization of particular ends of ultimate knowledge become subjects of speculative disagreement. Poetry introduced into the amorphous region of this debate—the region of human endeavor to encompass the unavoidable possibility-impossibility preoccupation and resolve it into a living story of progressive decision—a *stand*.

Poetry, as it were, civilized impossibility for the world of literary storifying of the human endeavor to attain to a decisiveness of being: to be livingly one with the truth of a knowledge of the nature of our being that was at once a knowledge of the nature of being in its comprehensive realness. The poetic component of

literature is regarded as of a primitive ancestry in comparison with its prose components, in their character as of an intellectually planned, more deliberate kind of verbal composition. But poetry as having the identity of a component of literature has that identity necessarily as being and intellectually prompted and shaped kind of verbal composition. The features of poetry that connect it in historical accounting for it with primitive rituals of cantatory utterance, the physical devices of emphasis that survive in it, and devices for keeping utterance taut with image-evoking words for maintenance of emotionally concentrated attention, represent no more than a placation of suspicion of poetry as treating of matters, subjects, courses of thought and knowledge-experience, from a condition of mind exceeding the limits of the possibility for human beings of their fully understanding the nature of their being and of the realities of being implicated in it. The coming to be of poetry as part of the literary articulations of human consciousness, as a form of expression distinct from song and chant, expression which set apart certain areas of knowledge and understanding as impossible of access to human powers of mind and expression, marked the demysticization of those areas—what I have called the civilizing of impossibility.

The traces left in poetry of the early mysticalities of ritualistic simplifications of expression of the difficult, the over-difficult, in human knowledge-experience, constitute a compromise with a surviving primitive human disposition to fend off intercourse of mind with the impossible-seeming in knowledge and understanding: restriction of expression to a boundaried though far extended possible is cultivated as infallible protection against mistake-making excesses in ventures of knowledge and understanding. Poetry has used a double justification of itself in its endeavor to penetrate the areas of impossibility (areas regarded as exterior to the mind's reaches)—to demonstrate their penetrability. It presents the human mind in a condition in which it engages without trepidation in endeavors of knowledge and understanding extending beyond the margin of the readily expressible, the surely communicatable, in its experiences of apprehension. It establishes the unalienness to the mind, the unforbiddingness, of endeavor to think the difficult to think, encounter the difficult to encounter in mind, give expression to what is customarily regarded as belonging to mind-resisting kinds of knowledge and understanding even because the expression of it is not imaginable as other than *difficult*. But to its espousing of the difficult, in experience, for the mind, and the difficult expression of it, as not

prohibitively difficult, poetry joined relics of those make-easy devices to which I have referred, by which, in pre-poetry, all difficulty was simplified out of the field of attention, the excluded difficult having assigned to it the nature of mystery—that which must reveal itself to be known, speak itself to be understood.

Poetry has the assigned part, and status, in literature's storifying of how human beings make their way through the intricacies of the possibility-impossibility debate, of a defender and prompter of their capability of overcoming, as beings of mind, the appearance of impossibilities in knowing and understanding that assail them as mere bodily constitutions isolated each in itself. But it confuses its representation of the difficult as potentially intelligible by tempering its intellectual enthusiasm to a presumed general human hesitancy to meet head-on, in mind-experience, what has not been familiarized into the automatically intelligible. Confusingly, much of what passes for the characteristically poetic consists of treatment of the generically "difficult" subject-content of poetic expression as linguistically reducible to simplicities of phrasing allying it to the subject-content of the mind's habitual, anticipation-fixed, range of experience. Judgement of what poetry "is" has been constantly attended, in its reception as a natural element of literature, and for poets themselves, by attitudes that qualify its essential nature (from which its existence as a distinct literary genre derives), as confident engagement in intellectual experience customarily presumed to be of faintest, even questionable, possibility, with conceptions of ultimately ineluctible difficulties for human intellectuality. Sympathy with, desire for, engagement itself in, poetry have all contributed to the fixing of the kind of experience peculiar to the poetic genre of the telling of the story of being at degrees of intellectual success allowing ever for an ultimate failure-range that maintains the supposition of a safe intellectual side for human consciousness, in the endeavor for all *possible* knowledge and understanding.

The compromise-element in the very sustenance of poetry as a crucially important truth-agency among the varied modes of storifying human life that are aggregated in literature has neutralized its potency, its credibility, as explicit evidence of the beyond-arm's-length, larger-than-brain's-breadth's, intellectual reach of our minds. The techniques of expression-style that distinguish poetic literature from prose literature were designed for the persuasive effect of presenting intellectual experience of an order commonly classified as outside the naturally experienceable, the normally possible, as, on the contrary, not at

all formidable—as, indeed, agreeably conceivable experience. The flaw in the poetic promotion of the intellectually difficult as humanly necessary experience, of a primary importance for fullness of being, is not in excess of zeal. The conventions of artistries of persuasion that are ingrained ineradicably in the linguistic texture of poetry have their origin in a timidity towards the power that the conception of the Unknown, the Impossible-to-know, holds over minds, continuingly from primitive modes of thinking: in this conception, the mysterious was made to fill the greater part of the space of consciousness—beginning where safety of mind seemed in *stopping thinking*. The deference of poetry to the religious sensitivity of human beings to the possibility of the existence of areas of experience mystically closed to their minds has been a halter fixed by poetry upon itself by which it has guided itself through the ordeals of cultural suspicion as dedicated to follies of concern with the intellectually impossible.

Poetry's culturally anxious preoccupation with persuasive exhibition of the emotionally innocent (even naive) character of its intellectual concerns has crammed its engagement with the intellectually difficult, primitively identified with the humaly impossible, into the framework of an apologetics that recommends the poetic level of intellectual experience and expression as the happy human maximum while minimizing its actual consequences for human life as the life-state of beings of mind. The value of poetic intellectuality has ever been moderated, in poetry's cultural representation of itself, to enjoyable interludes of venture into the intellectually unordinary, not intended to be or capable of being disruptive of the literarily prevailing indeterminacy of attitude to the possible-impossible theme of debate of the human mind with itself. The peculiarity of poetry, of maintaining a cultural impartiality, a literary objectivity towards its intrinsic nature as an intellectually independent literary genre, though under literary supportive protection, has enfeebled the human mind's will to oppose the prohibitions of religious mysticality against endeavor of mind to attain to intellectual experience across lines marked as separating the possible from a forbidden soul-deathly impossible. The self-moderating cultural-literary posture of poetry has, in the first place, enfeebled its source-connection with the natural impulses of the human mind to take its powers of knowledge-experience and of thought-containment of understanding to an intellectual full corresponding to its autogenous, free-born sense of itself. Poetry can be said to have been continually declining in its dignity of function as the linguistic stronghold of

human intellectual virtue and effectuality of being.

That poetry, as a component of literature, has, all along its functioning course, conspired against its dignity as the seat of the status of human beings with themselves as spiritual beings, this identity resident in the intellectual self-possession with which they confront the fact of being, can be verified in the queasiness of poets—a queasiness of steady accumulation—towards the attributing to them of preoccupation with themes, concerns, areas of experience denominatable as "intellectual," in implied contradistinction to emotional response to experience as the culturally humane poetic predisposition. This falling in with a vulgar primitivistic prejudice against intellectuality as fraught with abnormal mental propensities has been reflected in a matching queasiness in the writers of poetic criticism, academic and journalistic. In both critic and poet ranks, religiosities of anti-rationalism, myth-infatuated subjectivism, have arisen to assault intellectual processes, and their operative mechanism, the coherencies of language, as representing a sort of demonology of overcivilized, false, truth-worship—worship of impossibility, the intellectual possibility of truth, which primitive discretion of mind interdicted as intellectual impossibility.

Much of the literary cold-shouldering to which my poetic work has been subjected—my poetic work with more scathing objection than can be found in criticism to which my other writing has been fated, in the treatment of its various parts as uninvited guests of literature—has been based on identification of it as essentially anti-poetic in being of an intensively "intellectual" temper. This identification has been given its full significance of qualities improper to poetry, as present in my poems, in the term "cerebral"—translating "intellectual" into the plain language of anti-intellectual bigotry. The word "mind" itself, becomes, simply, a word of this language of rather disreputably tenuous meaning. It has been suggested, for instance, that my poems have the peculiarity—not to be summarily despised—of representing a poetry of the *mind*. From just what quarter of the human being as an intelligence poetry should be conceived of as issuing, it would be impossible, in the dark-age intellectualism of modern-mindedness, for minds of that mindedness to speculate upon without propounding absurdities, which they could not recognize as such.

The trail of intellectual good-sense—the human mind's proper confidence in itself as *mind*—has been lost, along the way to modern time; it lost itself in

poetry, the last refuge of intellectual self-respect among the distinct areas of thought-expression legitimized as culturally respectable in human societies. Intellectuality in the religious area, from being a walled-in precinct of esoteric religious apologetics, revised itself into a secularistic too religiose to have any secularly practical, too secularistic to have any spiritually practical, bearing on the general problem of human beings, how to live—to think and speak—as beings of *mind*. Philosophy, as a specialistic, professionalistic, engagement in intellectual activity—intellectual activity formalized into an esoteric privacy of mental activity hieratically marginal to ordinary, commonplace human thinking—functioned for long as constituting an area of intellectual freedom in which could be enjoyed an immunity from accountability for transgression of cultural (religious or political) ordinances demarcating where the safely possible in thought terminated and the impossible began. In its beginnings, philosophy was a loose composite of protopoetic and protoscientific intellectuality—the protoscientific and the protopoetic predispositions in uncertain balance. The scientific element of protophilosophic intellectuality had the advantage over the poetic element of possessing a utility-value of possible relevance to circumstances within the compass of physical experience. It persisted as an element of historically natured philosophy until a separately developing scientific intellectuality robbed it of its intellectual status as a component of philosophy by undermining the justification of philosophy's own existence.

Indeed, philosophy was gradually transformed as an area of privileged experimentation in intellectual activity, into a no-man's-land of effort to overcome intellectual difficulties the possibility of overcoming which was regarded as realizable only in *imagined* exploits of thought. Philosophy, that is, became a battle against the intellectually impossible already lost, in reality, by the nature of "things" (everything), but engageable in successfully in excursions into territories of intellection outlined on maps of the intellectually impossible conceived of as hypothetically less than impossible. Poetry also underwent a gradual loss of status and substance as a province of human concern with the capability of human beings of realizing the full of their nature as self-possessed intelligences—their nature as minds. Its identity as the region of dissipation of primitive mythologies of the Impossible in speakable thought-experience has lost so much of its cultural credit of intrinsic intellectual authenticity that the appearance, or evidence, of distinct intellectual activity in engagements in

poetic activity has come to be critically characterized as the trademark of *philosophical* poetry. Thus, W. H. Auden, that dauntless poet-venturer into the sargassan accumulation of weedy modern intellectual idiom, dubbed me "the only living philosophical poet"—I seen by him as a uniquely skilled skimmer-off of stuff of philosophical verbality.

3

I have been explaining on what kind of historical ground I stepped in my seeing, in my early life, poetry as the only open pathway to my engaging in operations of intelligence answering to my—to my mind's—will to explore the possible in knowledge and understanding of all that is to know and understand. This "possible" was not conceived by me to be an extent of experience inevitably bounded by an ultimate "impossible." I did not regard my mind—nothing and no one had induced me by direct or indirect influence to regard it—as other than an organ of thought having the functional potency of an autonomous consciousness. I never, as a child, or in my years of growth towards adulthood, had any responses to my individual experiences inhibiting me from taking them into my consciousness in free fullness. My responses were not creations of opinion or predilection, not repetitive in their character, as such responses are customarily; they were addressed undividedly to the immediate occasion of experience, not split between a prepared attitude and attention to what I found confronting me qualified by it. My mind was innocent of collusion with the thought-inclinations of others or partialities of my own to ways of thinking—engaging in experiences of mind—possessively favored with me as mine. Such detachment from particular associative customs of ideas-holding and attitudes-taking affects the mind's management of its language-procedures. I had no prompting, initially, in the forming of my speaking habits, from a family-pattern of fixed modes of expression and concentration upon set subjects of interest, or from any pattern of larger associative scope on which the domestic pattern impinged. Nor was there any appetite of nature in me for the protection of the customs of thought and habits of speech of special enclosures of association that little private worlds or separatistic public worlds provide from an outer world or a general world-at-large conceived to be the stranger-enemy of the comfort of being and feeling at home in how one thinks and speaks, sharing in the common comfort of all thinking and speaking in that particular manner.

It would take me much, much, longer to describe my approach to the necessity of disposing one's mind to the problem confronting us all, in our life-beginnings as intelligences, of deciding what to expect of one's mind—expect of oneself—in achievements of knowledge and understanding, if I used the devices of autobiographical narrative, telling, for instance, of the natures of my mother and father and older sister; and to what extent the common and individually differing concerns and attitudes of this little domestic population pressed themselves into my consciousness, and made my nature their habitat—or were resisted by my nature as intruders, thieves somewhat of its privacy with itself. And with what outer environments the little world of family personalities and circumstances had special affiliations, or into which I was propelled by mere inevitabilities of growth, that drew me into experiences that complicated the impressions formed in the private range of early experiences with suggestions of facts and rules of life producing conceptions of life's allowances that may have committed my desires and ambitions to prescribed expectations.

No sifting by myself or anyone else of the content of associations and experiences of my early years of life—the years that are in conventional autobiography or biography treated as character-moulding—would provide clues to the actuality that I, identifying myself and my mind as one and the same integer of being in my earliest phases of articulate consciousness, faced myself into a direct confronting of the constitutional entirety of being. In coming to know that I was I, I came to see that entirety manifesting itself, in incidental ubiquity in all the incidents of my experience. Whatever went into the making of me into a being whose mind and physical individuality proved to exist—as they did—bound in a fidelity of existing as of one nature, the makings made themselves into a madeness of me without the assistance or intrusion of factors of personal history, or a seizure by one making of dominancy in my nature giving me a one-track character, or a contention between two or more of them creating a constant problem of character-integration. What is denominated "character" with the sense of a self-government principle put by a person in charge of the makings that constitute his nature is, indeed, a superimposition upon the individual nature of a second self to it, the makings of which are acquisitions of sagacities pertinent to defensive meeting of experience-circumstances challenging the authenticity of the individual nature as something of determinate reality in itself. The consciousness that has ever been mine of the determinate reality of my individual nature has disburdened my experience of myself, as the active

center of my experiencing of everything existing for personal experiencing, of anxieties of anticipation of threats from experience-circumstances to my given nature; my self first found myself to have a consciousness of myself not forced on me by any particular environment, but enjoyed as a condition of ease in the possession of it.

My first concerns of mind—with concern of mind a property of attention not only to closely present experience-occasions but also to all the experience-possibilities of the general environment of conscious and self-conscious individual being—were, as I am here trying to describe, of a quality not disparate from those that were mine insistently in my later times, in which the initial express manifestation of them took on the culturally categorical form of literary performance, *genus poeticum*. In the broadly literary and particularly poetic direction of choice in which my mind moved, the possibilities of thought, and therefore of mind-livable experience, were correspondent in realizability with the expressive possibilities of language. I wish to be understood, however, in all my pains-taking to identify my choice of poetry as a path of fulfilment of necessities of mind that were familiars of my consciousness from its earliest existence for me as the personal substantiality of my mind, as picturing a kind of self that I consider every human being ought be presumed to have, by the central implication of "human."

I was from my earliest self-distinct being a thinking being: I trace this characterization back into a rememberable early-child selfhood of mind along a line of sense of myself as having presence, unbrokenly, in the successive times and places of which my life-history is built, with a certain fullness of thought-immediacy as the body of the presence perfectly coincident with its physical immediacy in the particular place in time, time in place. This I believe to be not a personally unique story of a life-long consistency of self-identification as one's self. It is only the kind of living as a self-possessing self that corresponds with the kind of being human beings have by how they are *made*. Their makings incorporate, by the evidence of language, which projects itself from the unity their makings achieve as a consummating expression of the unity of being with itself in the possibilities of being it generates, the quality of self-identity that is the intrinsic reality of being-unindividual, undivided being.

It can be seen, from how I have described my disposition to the life of general experience as a life for which thought-engagement in the possibilities of knowl-

edge and understanding of the Existent, in its distinctive forms and its prevailing essentiality as Being indivisible, has been its personal activity-center, what I judge to be the humanly natural—to be to the point of existing in the form of and by the functional principle of *human* identity. My sense of the humanly natural, moreover, my instinct of this in my own direction-giving to my life, took me to the poetry-precinct of literature as the where, in the continuity of the endeavor of human beings to live a life of speaking intelligence of the nature of being, in which there was least reversion to primitive avoidance of pressing the possibilities of knowledge and understanding to a point spelling impossibility for the sustaining of consciousness of human identity. Poetry is a speaking-place, in the world of human life as life of mind, in which, uniquely among the places in it for long set aside for effort to discover what can be said, told, to the fortifying of belief in the reality of human life, the only limitations put upon what may be attempted there are those of verbal propriety of a certain kind. The limitations upon the extent and kind of literary engagement that have shaped the character of other types of literature did not enter into the conventions of poetry; it came closer to matching the need of human beings, in their consciousness of themselves as beings of mind, for a manner of open verbal representation of themselves as such than any other literary type of expression, and any of the forms of speaking convenience that have constituted the spasmodical rhetoric of what is called "ordinary" speaking. Poetry has served as a signal of hope to the natural human desire for language's equalness to the engagement of the mind in thought-experience, with express realization of it, to reaches of enlarged life of mind *still* mistrusted in the shadowy corners of innumerable human minds as fearsome places of death of mind.

I have been stressing the human naturalness of my instinctive disposition to human experience as mind-centered, and of my adoption of poetry as a way of engagement in what is suspected of being, in human frailties of death-fear, impossibility. Poetry has allowed of the testing of language's capability of supporting the mind in its effort of attaining to complete embracing of the knowable and understandable, in fulfilment of its nature as a living form of the self-intelligence of being, indivisible being, "reality," the one-natured all-that-is. The putting of language to this test is historically native to poetry; and anyone who treats poetry as the natural course of the mind's natural endeavor to function as a whole mind, its thought-experience the story-substance of a whole speaking, a truth-rapt telling, goes by the visible credit of the name, as

one goes by a street-name on a sign-post, turning into its line of progress as necessarily leading to the site of one's probing interest. As to the anticipation of possibilities of language's yielding fullnesses of speaking, telling, meaning-potency in the breathed or inscribed words: the anticipation is natural, there is implicit in the provisions of language, beyond the spare facility that the commonplace in word-use makes of them, a range of expressive potentiality that does not touch its limit in the professional literary styles that are called, in the aggregate, "prose." Poetry represented the consciousness of possibilities of heightening the expressive powers of language beyond the degrees of literary facility in word-use that may be called "commonplace" in relation to what has been attempted in poetic word-use.

It must be granted to the poetic vision of an expanded verbal expressiveness, suited to the mind's state in expansions of thought-experience beyond the norms of ordinary thinking and speaking activity and outside the bounds of general literary intellectual practice, that it did not of itself foster solemnities of lofty philosophic abstraction in the use of words, or aesthetical refinement of the physical features of words, for effects of extraordinariness in subject and manner of poetic statement—cardinal components of the practice of poetry. Poetic vision of the possibilities of the reaches of the mind in knowledge and understanding, and the reaches of the expressive power of words used in a harmony of truth-intention with the mind's thought-intention, was not, in the genesis of poetry and its taking form in human life as a manifestation of recognition of it as essentially a life of the mind, compromised by commitments to a literary definition of the nature of poetry. Conceptually—which is to say, in its intellectual foundations (which is to say, in the character of spiritual vocation animating it)—the function of poetry remained, in its career as a literary institution, *indefinite*; and it is in the very uncertainty of the objectives of poetry and its proper limiting procedural conventions, according to literary definition of the proprieties of intellectual and linguistic possibility, that is, in the very literary indefinability of poetry, that the relative intellectual and linguistic purity of poetry has inhered. Alas, this purity could not be a source of the development in poetry of a definition of its own of the intellectually and linguistically realizable, according to poetic vision, because it began itself in the freedom of indefinite conception, and then bartered its freedom for a status of relativeness to literature as supportive of it, in its want of an inherent definite principle of self-justification of its own.

At its purest, in its impurity, poetry has adhered more perfunctorily than zealously to the limitations of verbal propriety taken over by it as a placating religiosity from the primitive formalism of utterance disciplining the attraction of the intellectually forbidden in word and thought. It has endeavored to maintain a maximum of freedom from mythopoetic pieties of verbal style and cast of thematic thought, and from prescriptions of its *raison d'etre* not only by the canons of good literature but by those of all the non-literary standards of good intellectual and linguistic performance, and of that jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none, canonical order of values called "art." But the unvarying and invariable existence of poetry in its historical life as part of the general functional course of literature, because of its lacking an internally definite functional identity, has imprisoned it within the general attachment of literature to historical circumstance as its spiritual setting. While the literary possible has never transcended the circumstantially qualified intellectually and linguistically possible, poetry's ideal spiritual over-reaching into the historically impossible has never precipitated itself outside the temporal fields of literary perspective into actual immediacies of the implicit ultimate possible, the ever-immanent potential, in intellectual and linguistic realizations of the humanly possible.

4

I have presented the history of poetry as I have learned it to be, in my learning what poetry was not, from my giving myself to it and taking it unto myself as the emblem and the reality of human hope of redeeming language from subjugation to the exigencies of temporal convenience and subservience to the laws of short-lived literary eternity—the redeeming of language to its unity of nature with the intellectual soul that human beings have in their having *mind*. Without sense of this history, there could be no awareness of the double rôle that poetry has had in human intellectual life (intellectual life as the spiritual entirety of human life of the mind)—the one a literarily defined category of the endeavors of consciousness to encompass the possible in linguistically authenticated knowledge and understanding of the authenticities of being, the other a free range of the personally natural in the endeavors of consciousness as not limited by the literary confining of possibilities of realizing them to the range of the historically reasonable in expectation of the possible in the mind's utmost and language's utmost in matching expressive power. Without an awareness of the double nature of poetry's intellectual identity there could be no attaining by any poet to a comprehension of the doomedness of poetry to insoluble self-

contradictoriness, in its putting of its ideal objective under the protection of the logic of literary objectification. None of the few poets who have left off in being poets with implication of dissatisfaction with poetry itself has gone to the core of the reason of the discovered unsatisfactoriness. The core of the matter is in the poet's initial motivation in the adoption of poetry as a main form of mind-engagement.

The difference between myself and those others is that my adoption of poetry as a form of mind-engagement crucial for my envisagement of my life's possible, as of one reach with the possible implicit in the human concentration of the attributes of being, was that my vistas of expectation, in the adoption of it, were not sealed within literarily drawn horizons of the explicit possible in thought-experience of reality, of the one reality, in the living terms of the reality of being a human being. It took me a little life's-work length of dedication to poetry as the way of engagement in the total possible to learn of the inevitability of arrestation, to some degree in thought and at a proportionate impotence in the wording of it, that had been visited upon not only poets but the human all of those moved to live their being with fidelity to their nature as beings of mind, and to mind's tongue as their own. Our thinking and speaking course had been shrouded in spells of presumption of a doomed fatedness to encountering interminably *some degree* of unbreachable impossibility—spells cast upon human self-belief by the nervous doctrine of a loosely combined religious, philosophical, literary, and culturally generalized intellectual rulership.

The while I pressed my way as poet with confidence in the poetic potential as having an ideal identity with the human personal potential in a not categorically limited possible in articulately realized thought-experience, poetic practice was undergoing, in the peculiarly heightened consciousness of the general engagement in literature of the time, a challenge from the time to justify itself in terms of twentieth-century preoccupation with intellectual up-to-dateness. A spasmodical crisis of anxiety coursed through those years, aggressive effort to manifest intellectual up-to-dateness and perfectly satisfy, nevertheless, the literary canon of discrimination as to what is and is not "poetry." Although I was, from my beginnings as a poet, modern-minded, in awareness of the intellectual date of human life, and my own personal date as a being of mind, I neither early nor late sought in how I wrote poetically to exhibit title to intellectual modernity, or, on the other hand, to press for entitlement of my poems to treatment as conforming to one or another of the forms of poetic performance, whether experimentalist or traditionalist in their leanings, that were allowed literary respectability by twentieth-century dispensers of critical favor.

I kept my orientation as a poet uncomplicated by concern with questions of how

I fitted into contemporary critical mappings of literary contemporaneity, where my poetic work belonged, in the modern scene of poetry-production. I took my bearings from my sense of the existence of a natural relationship between the objective implicit in poetry, of vision of the possibility of fullness of expression of thought-experience at mind's full, free, thought-range, and my personal consciousness of mind's need of such fullness, for the immediate fullness of being of the person whose identity as a person is as a being of mind. In my temporal placement of myself in my engagement in poetry, I was conscious of modernity in the total human context of concern with the yet unachieved envisaged as immediately achievable, rather than in a special context of concern with literary-period modernity.

The modernity of self-conscious period-timing is necessarily a graduated modernity—a historical modernity, it can be called. In recent times I became aware that there had developed, in the ideological chronology of British-born literary-criticism of the last several decades, a sophistication of disdain of the term "modernist" as identifying a tendency in the poetic activity of the first two decades of this century towards new modes of poetic verbal style and compositional form. The adoption of a haughty antipathetic attitude to the term as an offending vulgarization of the special character of the address of poets in the twentieth-century to the problems of poetry took rather long to develop. It was a delayed reaction to the implications of the book that I wrote with Robert Graves as my collaborator, published in 1927, of the title *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry*. The term "modernist" was an appropriate characterization of the stir of consciousness, in poets of the first quarter of the century, of a new time-setting, and of the effort this induced to assure a marked difference in the poetic literature that bred itself in it from that of the preceding century. The term had no other function than the identification of this development. It was a useful term for the spot-lighting of the development in its effective existence as a self-unifying agglomeration of loosely kindred trends. And the book proved a useful critical report on the make-up of the temper of the twentieth-century's pioneer version of "modern poetry."

That book was not a doctrinaire bible of poetic modernisticism, a propaganda endeavor to win favor *en masse* for what it denominated "modernist poetry." The animating attitude of the book to the material as a whole with which it dealt was an interest in the restiveness permeating it all, what it betokened as sensitivity to a call from the new time-setting for something new in the conception of the poetically possible. For myself, as one keenly conscious of there being question in the new time of the very fate of poetry, a main concern was with what the shift in poets' sense of themselves to a new time-location might

betoken as an awakening to the need—the call from the anticipation implicit in poetry—for reaches of thought-experience and language-versedness unfettered by the accumulated self-pridings of poets of the past in variations or improvements upon, or ingenuities of imitation of, prior or coetaneous exhibition of the poetic possible. The inspiring ideal implicit in the existence of poetry had become submerged in the century-on-century self-reduplicating flood of the practice of it. For me, the question as to the upsurging, in the new century, of preoccupation with renovations in poetic practice was: What, how much, in the effort for the new in poetic performance, emanated from profundities of consciousness, in poets of the new century, of the estrangement that had settled into the sense of themselves, as poets, and into that of the poets who constituted their literary ancestry, and into the *materia poetica* that constituted the historical reality, "poetry," from the motive of fullness of utterance of mind's apprehensions at full, with which poetry was ingenerately informed? How much in the effort for the new poetic performance was mere self-assertiveness of poets as citizens of a new time, feeling themselves at liberty to produce a new brand of poetic literature?

My own perception, as a poet, of the fulfillment enfolded in the vision prompted by poetry of the completely possible, in the knowing, understanding, speaking, life of the human being as being of mind, made me conscious of how much was wanting from what should be, by the congruity of this vision with the essential nature of human being, my sense of which had directed my energies of hope into engagement in the possibilities that poetry presented to hope. In the assessing of the "new," in the inaugural phases of twentieth-century poetry, there had to be considerable allowance made for the potential presence, in the midst of all the self-assertive proclivities to mere innovation, of instincts roused to work for a revitalizing of the motive inhering in the existence of poetry, which had diminished to a static principle defensively justifying its existence as a literary necessity.

The underlying and variously sustained theme of *The Survey of Modernist Poetry* was the crisis-condition into which poetry had come of being on the brink of a loss of conscience of the fundamentals of linguistic principle and conscience of the fundamentals of intellectual principle—the partnering principles of the *rational* integrity of poetry. If the excitations of poetic impulse in the new time-setting had strong relation to an alarmed will in poets to perpetuate poetry against dissolution of its character as the proponent of the practical, verbally express potency of mind as the spiritual reader of the meanings of being, and beings—if the will towards poetry of these poets acting as agents of a new poetic dispensation had the quality of a determination upon a *renewal* of poetry's

vitiated fidelity to its foundation faith in reason as a spiritual function of the mind—the new impetus in poetic activity represented morally bonafide concern with poetry as embodying the literarily idealized possibility of verification of the reality of the human degree of being in its sense-making of itself as all-articulate mind.

The Survey of Modernist Poetry left unexplored the field of likelihood stretching ahead from the latter part of the century's second decade of poetic activity. The poetic work of the period dealt with in the book was evaluated in relation to a very liberal discrimination of the difference between a newly enlarged conception of the responsibilities and proprieties of poetic intent and shallow, time-proud motivation-impulse. There was indulgence of innovation, but mere dallyings in individualistic peculiarities of poetic diction and form were not awarded prizes of praise for "modernism"; no hospitality was dispensed to what was irrelevant to the resolution of the problem of what might be realized, within the scope and patterns of the poetic vision of the possible in lovingly worded thought, of the intellectually uninhibited, humanly unlimited possible in the speaking of the live meaning-content of *being*. The book rested at offering a record of the contemporary poetic provision as a basis of expectation of what might follow or not follow, in the century's further course, indicative of the fate of poetry as incorporating an ideal of the good as manifestable in words, and the fate of the human order of being in terms of the significance, in its regard, of the fate of poetry.

Nothing issued from what followed, in the programmatically new literary consciousness of the century's times, related to any determinate development in the crucial moral intertwining of the fate of poetry and the fate of human existence as an inwardly self-intelligent and outwardly real (expressly participant in the total reality—inward and outward—of the existent) order of being. I myself went on, until the late years of the following decade, probing the poetic potential as the way to the determinate fating of itself, of the human order of being, to the defining of the nature of being and of the good according to the truth-intentioned spirit, and rationality of structure, of *language*. Language increasingly took on for me, as I went further in poetry, its intrinsic force as the natural ascendancy of a law of the humanly possible over the primitive divinity of a law of the humanly impossible.

5.

The coverage of *The Survey of Modernist Poetry* was loosely divided between American and British poets, seen as calling for attention under the auspices of

the classification "Modernist." I shall justify the book's treating exclusively of these, besides by my and my collaborator's individual and common interest in and experience of poetic activity within the English language's bounds of poetic practice, by my own special sense of a marked difference between the American and British new-century self-consciousness of poets and that of the poets of other national identity. The difference between American and British poetic (and generally literary, and artistic) affectedness with new-time impulsions of self-liberation from old-time dispositions of mind, postures of feeling, modes of practice, maintained the two sets of new poetic behavior within a single frame, still, of a culturally humane conception of the literarily, poetically, linguistically, permissible. In American poetic activity in the vein of twentieth-century new-timed sensibility, exploration of "new" possibilities in forms of self-assertive preoccupation and expression enlarged upon an already developed general literary propensity in British poetic activity, a reserve of self-protective prudence kept the modernism of individualistic liberties-taking at a low-intensity degree of freedom for self-examining curiosity. In both, the urgencies of innovation enacted themselves within the intellectually respectable field of the new psychological versions of common sense. American poets were daring in their difference from one another. British poets were ingenious in creating a new poetic atmosphere from chosen elements of the early twentieth-century intellectual air and chosen elements of the intellectual spirit of poetic past-times seeming in sympathetic correspondence.

All that was produced, in American and British poetic locales, of the self-conscious time-spirit that was termed "modernist," in the book to which I have been referring, has left little besides ineloquent reverberations of twentieth-century literary history, much of it kept alive in the laboratories of critical academics, particular quantities of it randomly resuscitated for the uses of sentimental allusion of a literate sort. Early twentieth-century ventures in poetic modernism in other national locales—and in generally literary and artistic modernism—were of a go-for-bust recklessness, making war on the culturally humane while offering no alternative to it of a mind-fulfilling possible in works of express sensibility of consciousness of the nature of human being as partaking of the self-intelligence of the general nature of being.

The snobbish prudery of disapproval with which the vaguely grouped circles of British literary criticism of the century's later decades that regarded themselves as its best looked back upon the identification "modernist" (the innocently correct identification made in the *Survey of Modernist Poetry* of the new-time sense of themselves with which many poets of the early decades were

animated) was undoubtedly a manifestation of an awareness of the flattening out in the progress of the British twentieth-century continuum of the upsurgings of new-time self-consciousness that had whetted the ambitions of writers of the earlier periods. "Modern" was made, in later twentieth-century special British self-consciousness with respect to poetry, the authorized critical designation of a stabilized poetry, "modernism" outgrown. An air of purposeful normalness in poetic phrasings, rhythmical and metrical castings, and subject-matter and allusion variety-range, and a doughty democraticness of admixing of what was literarily denominated "everyday speech" with traditionally poetic forms of diction, became the mood-at-large of the poetry by later century British literary ascription termed "modern," with implication of freedom from temporal, period, eccentricity. The actual character of it all is that of endless, unbroken, human and intellectual monotony, all variation, trial of difference, extension of reach of thought and word, held within an arc of possibility strained with narrow tentativeness above the flats of literary instincts of historical self-preservation. Exceptions to this general British poetry-provision are of a somewhat go-for-bust, now out-of-date, daring, an overwrought vigorousness; they fall into place, in this poetry, as examples of the virile, in the make-up of the British literary temperament, to be proud of.

I am following these trails of differentiation in the behavior that the poetries of various twentieth-century cultural quarters have displayed, in responding to the provocation of a new-time consciousness, because the general result of the early rising and working of the consciousness has been a final dissipation of the influence-force of poetry on the human faculties of intellectual hope. The inspiration as which poetry served, through the literary ages, to faith in possibilities of comprehensive intelligence, fulfilled in immediacies of speaking corroboration of its rectitude in the exercise of it, proved finally ineffectual against the influence-forces, in their modern assemblage, of age-on-age of culturally civilized intellectual bargaining (with instinctive purpose to placate still primitively feared Impossibility) for an intellectually advanced but culturally (quasi-spiritually) undangerous Possible. Poetry could never have served as more, in the course of human beings' probing of what it means to be beings of mind, than a reminding vision of the human state as such a state of being, in the midst of the confusion of images of the human being that have been invented for the uses of power or advantage, or the relatively innocuous uses of vanity. I turned from poetry as I knew it in its live identity: a forecasting promise of the nullification of Impossibility, and realization of Possibility as Completeness—but bound to the never-never of historical futurity. There was a threshold to cross. I crossed it.

My commitment to poetry was not to poetry according to the literary representation of its identity in the terms of new-time self-consciousness, of historical up-to-dateness, but to poetry as the mind's conception of its intellectual adequacy ever-present to it in envisagements of the *possible* in full-worded realizations of the essential thought-nature of being. Therefore, the characterizations "modernist" and "modern" had neither terminological fascination nor critical suspectness with me. I was not worried about my or anyone else's literary-period identification or credentials. But concern with their place in time, with their *literary* immediacy, has been the worry-center of the intellectual preoccupations of twentieth-century poets', and, generally, those engaged in some form of cultural productiveness have been troubled with similar anxieties about the relevance of their engagements to their time. The anxiety-about-contemporaneity of English—as distinguished from American-literary orientation manifested itself, in conformity with the tendency of irritable adoption of postures of composure responsive to challenges to definitive position-taking peculiar to the native moral temperament, in what poets and critics of the post-early twentieth-century British literary locales have been terming with increasing complacency "The Movement." If one endeavors to identify the special character of the poetry of the "Movement," in its development and its persistence in the century's further course as a stabilizer of British poetic policy, one finds oneself faced by a canon of endless self-perpetuating intellectual eclecticism as the key to the practical possibilities for poetry in *modern* times.

"Modern," for British literary and general twentieth-century self-consciousness in the later parts of the century, came to signify a vague indeterminateness allowing of variations from a norm itself of undefined variability, but presumed to be the implicit rule of intellectual kindness for those sensibly free of leanings of prejudice. Of course, this intellectual mood, this moderness of sanguine literary seniority to earlier century historical self-consciousness in the area of general literary and particular poetic sensibility, does comprise leanings of prejudice. But the over-all loose signification attached to "modern" is expected to smooth out, in time, all disparities of leaning. A conception of "modern" poetry as an infinite succession of incidents of poems-production keeping alive the name of poetry replaces all earlier notions of new-century poetic newnesses: this process of automatic continuity imparts a ready-made up-to-dateness to all the poetry-displaying incidents.

In comparison with the British twentieth-century course of things poetic, the American has been confusingly ununiform. One can hardly, indeed, speak of an American twentieth-century course of things poetic. The self-assertive in-

sistencies in the American sector of early twentieth-century poetic modernism led into a widespread particularism of poetries of self-assertive force and pattern, intellectually, literarily, disconnected from one another: there was no blending into a common quality of self-assertive national concern for the national state of things poetic, and its repute at least with itself.

The experimental venture of certain members of the Fugitive group of poets, after its disbanding, in the propagation of a doctrine of Southern agrarian culture, had its roots, I believe, in a search for solider ground for their individual poetries than the mere identification of being Southern *poets*. After the subsiding of the episode, the participants concentrated their energies on their individual poetries to their respective capability of self-assertive disconnection. A later flare-up among them of programmatic connectedness under the "New Criticism" banner had its origin in the appeal to a surviving provincial intellectual vanity of the discoursing of British Empson on poetic ambiguity. The new interest resulted from Empson's seizing upon an important mode of textual examination of poems followed in the *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, a serious process of linguistic scrutiny of my providing, and perverting it into a trivially authoritarian rhetoric of critical analysis. My collaborator's later claim of having been the inventor of the book's poems-reading method has not won him lasting credits, as has so much of my thought and its works taken by him into possession—there is a trend of recognition of my being unmistakably the source of the method.

This post-Fugitive project of collective ambition was before long engulfed in the general national particularistic complexity of literary modernism, both the poetry and the criticism content of which was a medley of isolatedly individual productions.

6.

But what of myself, in relation to the account I have given of the self-conscious compulsion in American and British poet and critic activity to manifest twentieth-century intellectual contemporaneity? As a poet in the simple sense of one engaged in doing my expressive utmost to present in poems the suprapersonal essence of personal experiences, and as one, besides, engaged, as I increasingly became engaged, in the testing of the poetic possible as the full of the realizable in the human speaking possible, I did not make of my engagements a venture in construction of an individual literary authorial pile, or, on the other hand, assimilate myself in my work to the producers of some collective entity of literary architecture. My posing for myself a standard of the adequate in

human speaking—and, therefore, in human thinking—that was not derived from the historical content of poetry, but that I thought capable of being met with, through, poetry (with, through, what else, if not poetry?), had the effect of detaching me automatically, even in the initial phase of my poet-and-writer life, from both the sprawlingly busy looseness of American poetic and generally literary production and from the loose compactness of its United Kingdom counterpart (British literary individualism tends not to go beyond a cautious partition into sub-groupings within the collective entity constituted of the separate British island-like literary world).

My position in the general English-language literary consortium was not, has never been, one of self-cultivated detachment. I have had a position of detachment thrust upon me in both the American and the British areas of literary conceiving of the suitable in English-language literary modernity by a difference, in my initial stance as a poet, from the stances of American and British twentieth-century poets. This difference made me an eccentric in respect to what was, actually, an erraticism in their conception of the nature of poetry and, generally, literature, that became for them, and generally for the body of writers subscribing to identification of themselves as of twentieth-century mentality and emotionality, the poetic and literary *status quo*—the proper acceptance of existence in modern human times seen as calling for a peculiar order of attitudes to existence, and to human existence, itself.

The order of attitudes that became the century's mental stamp did not spring into being within the poetic-literary domain of activity, thought, conception. It issued into general cultural circulation from a wide-spreading break-down in the human intellectual imagination produced by the ascendancy of scientific report on the nature of things. The very idea of the universe was shattered by the enlargement of science into a story that little by little should factually cover the case of the manifold everything. The idea of all things as being, together as one not-just "thing" but a spiritual entirety, a reality of living significance within which we had existence as its articulate own, witnesses living the witnessed—the conception of a totality of difficult but perhaps not impossible knowability, that had been the motive force of mind behind the special prognosticative intuitions of poetry and the general imaginative tendency of literature—disappeared from twentieth-century intellectual life. It disappeared with the completeness with which a long-established scene of varied composition, of nature's or human-beings' making, or both, can be stripped of all evocative features of remembrance in a sudden sweep of devastation.

I had, in my writer-beginnings as a poet, and continued to have in all my

thinking and writing activity, what came to be, in the light of twentieth-century literary intellectual evaluation, the peculiarity of functioning with consciousness of presence in a *universe*. This intellectual position of mine, a position naturally mine, personally, and mine as a writer not disrespectful of the attitude-norms of an intellectual *status quo* that was the basis of literature's historic identity and continuity of identity, became, under the auspices of the revised intellectual *status quo* embracing everything to which literary identity was attributable, an irregularity for which neither American nor British twentieth-century literary-criticism characterization had a definition. And this inability to characterize my conception of my personal and writer *location*, because of the comprehensiveness of what I include in the writer-function—seeing it as the exercise of the language-function at its farthest reach of transcending the conventional cultural and linguistic limits of the possible-to-say—has persisted into the century's ninth decade as the basis of the general from period-to-period literary reaction to my work.

The first responses to my poetic work, from editors of the American magazines to which I in its earliest years submitted it, can be described as a pleased recognition of a something in subject-matter and verbal mode capable of simple identification as "originality": the identification subsumed what would in the later course of contact with my poetic work, and in the hardening of twentieth-century general, and especially literary, intellectuality, be given a character of intellectual unplaceability and literary irregularity. In those earliest years of my being a poet, I was welcomed into membership in the group of American poets of the name "The Fugitives"—was regarded by them as an important "discovery." My poetic writing was judged by them to be of a lively inspiration, to have a quality of intellectual vigor, and a spontaneous linguistic fitness, combining stylistic flexibility and control in its patterns of diction. No effort was made by them as a group to read me as, or make me, one of their kind. The association faded, within a few years, into a piece of literary history, with some remnant of significance in the context of literary intellectual history as an encounter between myself as a poet falling outside the identification-categories that served the American form of modern literary sensibility and The Fugitives as a band of poets seeking the distinction of an identity of aristocratic group-separateness from the newly modern national run of things poetic that would incorporate in it a certain temper, a special dignity, that could still claim to be a proper national character. I can be regarded, in this encounter, as sharing with The Fugitives a problem of literary placement with utter difference, in the actual nature of the problem, between them and myself.

I had no want of place in my self-identification, and in my assumption of the

functional identity of poet (extending into the linguistically comprehensive identity of writer). I was in the patent universe, having a human presence in it, a consciously exposed presence to it, living in it in the active state of engaging in what had long been generally literature's, and very especially poetry's, mission to demonstrate to be less than impossible. The specifically poetic, the generalized literary, objective was for me simple to the point of involving a one and only problem for the poet—for any who felt themselves versed in the spiritual potentialities of language. The problem was: did one—or did one not—envisage a fearless, free, putting into utterance all that has being, is in being, to the full of the opening of one's own being to the knowledge that words wait in mind to take into their hold?

I knew the place I had, for my functioning literarily, in the terms of my acceptance of the total given place of being. Until our century, this total place, the universal being-site, even as it gradually dimmed into the shadowy socio-politico contours of a *world*, was at least figuratively the environment of poetic utterance, and intellectual landscape of literary activity in the large. But "world" as the all-place became too *worldly* a site for direct literary location within it, the interests inhabiting it too varied for *literary* interests to hold their traditionally peculiar universe-savoring own in it. By the time the twentieth century had taken on historical growth, literary location had split off into world-like placements mapped outside the contracted world of modern, scientifically de-universalized human consciousness, in sentimental recognition of the spiritual foundations of literature: but literary location was actually sequestered within the compass of this world by a decline in spiritual vigor of dedication become general in activity of the perennially revered identity "literary."

The placement-problem of The Fugitives was the common one of the new literary age: What to do? and Where to go? for the doing of it. The attitude of The Fugitives to the problem was different from that which was becoming the prevalent, the standardized, attitude to it of American literary practice: the individual writer sought a place in a literary world made up of places consisting of individual entities of literature-orientated endeavor—the modernized American literary scheme of things became systematically, where it had previously been spontaneously, pragmatical. The Fugitives longed for something more intellectually decorous, "better," as British literary worldliness of the new age seemed superior by its social quality of national coherence. None of the Fugitives individually, or the group as representing a composite of individual yearnings, solved the problem of finding a formal literary world-frame within which to settle happily upon *What to do* as writers. John Crowe Ransom came the

closest to this kind of writer-composure by adhering to an original disposition to philosophical non-committalism: in all his allying of himself with others in causes of formalizing literary-activity placement, creating patterns of literary-world intellectual decorum, he maintained a private reserve of quizzicality, a self-scrutinizing humor that stripped him to an identity with himself as one who wanted in personal reality to be nothing other than a reasonable man. He was the most typically "American" member of the group, in his desire to "be himself" in what he did literarily—the desire qualified by a humane-minded rejection of the spiritually provincial American reliance on the energies of self-assertion as the surest means of realizing the ends that come first with one. But all the members of the group—myself a newcomer whose contacts with it were not such as to knit myself with the others into family-like connection—strove for writer-identity and placement under the cloud of a problem of literary-world location. I knew no such predicament of choice and decision.

The ratio of possible-impossible was for me not a ratio in terms of a somehow acceptable compromise between existing literary-worldly opportunities for poetic, and general, writer-activity and what I conceived myself fit for and capable of doing as a poet, a person claiming "writing" as a natural personal function and life-occupation. My poetic writing, and my evident personal stance in it, attracted The Fugitives, I judge, by its evident freedom from consideration of worldly and literary-worldly pressures to do a this-or-that, or find residence in an acceptable here-or-there. They equated their elaborate privately devised honor-system with my unhesitating, unpremeditating, immersion of myself—I accepting myself as endowed with a ready writerhood identity and natural-world (universal-setting) location—in the chances of kinship discoverable between my engagement in the impossible that honorable speaking being cannot allow to be impossible and the engagement of others in solemnities of speaking (in writing) as true believers in an ultimate all-sayable. I began my writerhood in the open of my sense of myself as functioning under all the tests there might be of the reaches of the possible in the determinations of words. They began in the shelter of a literary-family world of their own, as protected in it from the inducements to identity and location-finding in the great open spaces of the American early twentieth-century literary world that might compromise their standards of what they wanted to do, and what place to be in, in the doing of it.

The Fugitives were trying to set up conditions for the kind of literary world in which they wished to function; and they were, in this, dreaming wistfully of a kind of social structure of things literarily typified by British literary-world law-like custom. This was a rule of automatic consent by all involved to as much

liberty of individualism in literary activity as did not interfere with an over-all uniformity, designed to accommodate itself to the partner-principle of individualism designed to accomodate itself to *it*. They did not succeed, any, in placing themselves comfortably in the American literary world—eventually, each went cowled, in his taking his place in the American literary stretches, with the *idea* of a suitable literary world as something that lent a distinction of special literary purity to their American-writer status. The element of *control* in the mechanism of British literary-world functioning I have described has had an attraction for others besides The Fugitives. It was this, I think likely, that drew Eliot into the British sphere of writer-functioning: it afforded security from the uncontrolled, free-ranging individualism of American writer-functioning, and kept special influences, such as those of French literary modernism, from taking too serious a hold. Pound himself felt the attraction of traditional organizedness of literary practice in old-world countries—besides that of the developing go-for-bust propensities of old-world literary modernism. (One might think of him as trying to lay down the principles of a coherent, well-organized literary modernism by Americanizing old-world literary niceties and preciosities into a style of disciplined self-assertiveness.)

I myself did not run away from the haphazard American literary succession and varying sum of things. But there was no basis for my having a sense of necessary attachment to the American version of a literary world. The relationship with The Fugitives apart, which itself proved to be upon no distinct common ground of writerhood principle, there lacked, for my absorption in the American version of a literary world, and my accommodating myself to absorption in it, the ingredient in my writer make-up of the kind of intensity of preoccupation with being-a-writer characteristic of typically American writerhood. This is an intensity of preoccupation in the writer with making his writing performances an imprint of himself upon the environing literary scene that he has accepted (according to the fixed professional wont of writers generally in modern literary times) as an entire world-frame of activity, comprising the outer limits, intellectual, moral, spiritual, of all the significance his writing could evoke. No other national literary society is marked by this intensity of writer-preoccupation with self-imprinting as the logical objective of writer-concentration on writing.

7

No other type of association in-the-large of human beings exists that is distinctly resemblant of the American in its having as its basis the principle that to be a human being is something of prime importance. The principle has but a faint

emotional reality as the axiom of national identity—the territorial actuality, America, must be imaginatively visualized, ever, for concrete emblem of nation-actuality. And, as the principle has been cast in political, philosophical and religious terms, there is present in them only vaguest suggestion of a peculiarly American conception of the wise, the right, the good, in human association. There can be said to be an American idea of life. But nothing more definite can be said about the idea than that all the sense in it is focused on the single, generally self-evident fact that to be a human being is something of prime importance. The American idea of life is conscious of a fact converted into a principle. That the idea is not corrupted with ideas of in what this importance consists borrowed from past notions of it need not be regarded as a miraculous escape from the inevitabilities of imperfection considered implicit in human character, human thought. The American idea of life has the purity of untroubledness about what the prime importance may be that inheres in the fact of being a human being—which has the unfortunate effect of stupefying those possessed of it into a persuasion that all the problems of the heretofore and the elsewhere of human life lie off-shore to the American dispensation of understanding.

The general American inclination in thinking on what there exists for the human mind to know and understand has been to stop just where the sense of there being something of prime importance in being human draws a line of time across the path of what seems an endless indeterminate sameness of the state of being human. The characteristic intensity of American-mindedness, the urgent immediacy, peculiar to American thinking, of consciousness of the fact of being human as having implications seeming of an almost unthinkably extensive scope, had had issue only in a self-confidence in the fact that does not try itself out in projection into the possibilities it is assumed to embrace. The intensity of the consciousness uses itself over and over as a barrier against desperation. The social cheer of American life is, thus, a continual back-turning on an ever-deferred broaching of the yet unexplored part of the fact and the experience of being human, a collective privacy that does not break down either into privately or publicly enjoyed illuminations of the yet unidentified importance and significance of being human.

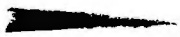
The general course of American life illustrates in amplitude, I believe, my descriptions of the effect of this keeping at halt, in strenuosities of diversified exertion, the intuitions of an importance belonging to the fact of being human of universal reference. That I use the term "universal" to indicate *my* sense of the actual reach of these intuitions, I feel a right to do by my likeness, in my

sense of my energies of human being, to that common to those born and upreared in an environment to a large extent free, in comparison with other national environments, of governing presumptions of the nature of the human state of being. But there is also, in my use of the term, a reliance on the difference I know, in my mind's will from the historically developed will of generalized American-mindedness, towards the projection of the energies of human-being into areas of knowledge and understanding prehistorically and historically denied to human possibility. This difference has contributed to there being an even more marked disregard of my poetic and other writing, in the American literary environment, than that of the deliberate inattention to which it has been subjected in other literary environments.

The difference between the prevailing trends of mindedness in twentieth-century literary performance and the intellectual disposition of my writing, in its whole character, is centered in my mind's will's being given over to a purpose to imprint upon human actuality the fact of a universal actuality opened to elucidation in the language of human actuality by the responsive presence of the human actuality in the universal. This is a will operating in a scene of purpose absolutely removed from the scene of purpose of the self-imprinting operations (the imprinting of human actuality upon human actuality) that became the American type of twentieth-century versions of the literarily possible, and from the scene of every other type of twentieth-century engagement in the possible. From the account of the nature of this difference there should not be omitted reference to the bearing of my identity as a woman upon my functioning in my identity as a human being. How the factor of access to the alleged impossible for the human mind figures in my will of mind, and my thought-experience generally, has crucial connection with my sensibility as a woman of the presence of the human actuality in the universal actuality. The minds of men develop such sensibility as women instinctively possess by the overcoming of instincts of defensive proprietorship-sense of their human actuality; the records of human thinking are heavily marked with emphasis and counter-emphasis in relation to this conflict between masculine instinct and sensibility transcending it, the forms of thought produced by the conflict descending from age to age as the generally natural in the ways of the human mind.

Sensibility of universal actuality as of intimate meaning for human actuality is not of an order to require an overcoming of instinct; it belongs generically to the human instinct of the interpresence of human actuality and universal actuality. I have always steered away from raising question of the effect of the fact

of my woman identity in the critical antagonism visited upon my work, and from feministic militancy in approach to questions of sexual differentiation in matters of literary pertinance calling for intellectual evaluation wanting critical principle, not feminine suspicion, for my instrument of judgement. But here I adduce for noting, among considerations as to why my mind's will as exemplified in my thought's courses, has moved, and moves, as it has, and does (my work widely viewed as disparate from all twentieth-century literary norms), the connaturalness of my engagement in endeavors to discover the full extent of my mind's possible in thought-experience possibility and my mind's being the mind of me, in my identity as a woman. My uninhibited acceptance of my woman's sensibility of the presence of the human actuality in the universal confers uninhibited appreciation of the truth-potential of the language of human actuality.



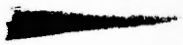
Gerald Burns

from A BOOK OF SPELLS

A green light. The Eight-Oh bar. Greenery
or Rose neon less than orange or lilac
bodied in air so things feel closer
not from warmth but fighting a thinness
one may choose for a bar (and cut with rose around the clock).
Loves and loaves, to reduce all but fishes to baking
as I thought (before I was in Ireland) a fry includes fish
whereas bacon or sausage will be operative. James
is not mine in spite of knowing Jameses, the one
in the Michigan museum, young, looking like Ezra Pound
the white forelock there but not yet all the insolence
my sympathy's for him later, when he wished more anatomy.
Paint may happen to exhibit, as cummings
inept with oil does thirties portraits
(the face from two angles, nose turned, eyes front)
with the floppy hat like Kennedy's at Hogarth
or by his thinly painted flowers and vase, more white
and yellow for the petals to be violent.
There were, walking to the bank, red flowers. Walking closer to see
(having admired the extreme hot red) thick stalks, cut ones and dying
the color faked—a pink almost magenta overlain with red-orange.
A little book of Carew or someone Love Songs bound in gilt

wanted to be wrapped. Even unslip-cased
it would have been a widemouth puppet snaffling the whispered
bits, stroppings of a knife where syllables meet
and another listens, mouth only a little more shut.
This group. Spray it white, it becomes classic, gray
a Boucher garden piece, deathly cupid audience
the air before the tree or what spills invisibly
from fountain "lip" the air loving souls inhabit.
Cezanne looks at me from this book, the decision
to glue him in (the baldheaded, in the Phillips) the
reproduction too ruddy and the rough coat, oh, in the original—
Lynette's with blond hair and khaki top coveted.
That lovely tortoiseshell standing tea with a little milk in can get
like—what, the rock formed from dried mud, later mud
forcing into the cracks, cut, polished
a floor of it, I think hexagonal.
Arabesque as elements in Kells or columns
of porphyry in Washington madonnahouses, linger
the crucifix with black wood, tongue turned to silver.
The photographer says with a manner so gentle
it's odd that my face should be hard or harsh.
One thinks of monks round from mutton caught with
edges like parchment; grapes are theology.
Lately unpeeling shrimp to be dipped
in red sauce, the sections in the hand like almond
skins from the blanching pan, things done to things
pork, hazelnuts in apple, liver dumplings, Tokay.
One body on a couch, merely digesting, is lonely enough
or the Irish model they put on Moore's Confessions straddling a
sofa all satin white-pink lady hair blond
the charm of it her finding the posture so possible.
Milkmaids abound, and give you a bit of milk for a bit of fish.
Fleshing out is no good, the historical Socrates

more amiable from our knowing the barley bun he ate
cloth, his apron he could throw over his head
are these meetings as in Borrow, and was it really millet?



Barrett Watten

PROGRESS

Thought in the light of useless
Intelligence,
rabbits jump
Into machine to become hats
As the film runs backwards. . . .

To be understood as a statement
It must also be understood.
Not that I can think that I
Think,
every twenty seconds. . . .

A complete thought,
but behind
These mannequins is not you
But a medial arena in which
The world is peripheral. . . .

To an act,
and stars are fixed

Not in a heaven of reversal
Around each of these states
But on an uneven surface. . . .

A train arrives at a connection
With the steamer at Harwich,
Calm seas meaning an absence
Of storms by connective,
if. . . .

Then there have been no storms
Or there will be a passage
And passengers will arrive
Not before leaving,
Burma Shave. . . .

Signs pass in sequence,
trucks
Transport two tons of glass
In a transparent illusion,
A statement stands by itself. . . .

To indicate large-scale complex
Thought of,
what I want is
The figure of invention as
Compensation for private speech. . . .

Rocks thrown at panes of glass
Metrically,
sound carrying
The duration of the street,
Because a face had grimaced. . . .

Not to die of pre-impact terror
But an executioner suddenly
Feels a resolve to slacken
In a game,
a possible outcome. . . .

Expressing a victory over time
At the time of victory,
as
Any action is a probability
Of its being the winning move. . . .

I must go through this machine
In order to be born,
boxing
Gloves put in face yielding
To nipples in baby's mouth. . . .

Needing support from elsewhere,
Else an anonymous gesture.
This is the machine,
an X
Or network of concrete fibers. . . .

I decide to turn off at Y Road,
That is a decision.
Girders
Built by aggressive erectors
To make superstructure a base. . . .

For what comes next,
stability
Of terms sets in by analogy.
Between piles of rocks are
Long shadows as the sun sets. . . .

Say I call this shadow a thing,
A harbor cruise at Newport
Moving away from the sun
In a diagonal,
Watermelon Man. . . .

Rolls between reflecting walls
Lining a road,
patterns of
Identical squares by design,
A good photograph is a *winner*. . . .

A channel specifies breakwater
And boats,
room to float in
For the elite of Rhodesia,
Meaning discovers a method. . . .

A desire to write as inculcated
By a writer alone in a room
Only if you can read this
To produce myself,
a dialogue. . . .

Fixing a voice as it coheres
On the page,
to be adjusted
I go away and return later
A distance that equals results. . . .

You are only because you occur
And that is a true thought
Because it is there to find
Cities behind access,
depth. . . .

But only in depth of questions
Put to a vacu-formed model
In Anaheim as the province
Of the poem,
the sun reappears. . . .

Shadows move 360° around a room,
A better picture of dread
In atoms of congealed mist
Than I can speak,
a vocabulary. . . .

The system *BW* is the connection
Of these ideas with words,
The Low Countries disappear
As smog melts icecap,
water. . . .

Anything named is to be tilted,
The air mixes roughly,
birds
Point in the same direction,
Trees stand out in relief. . . .

Around each of these states is
A periphery of mixed states
Each with its own semantics,
South America,
a huge cloud. . . .

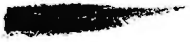
I reject a symbol for pig-iron
Production along the Volga
Visited by Lumumba on tour
In a gondola of coal,
fused. . . .

In the heart of a blast furnace
As a word,
meanwhile voices
Urge syntagma of sightseers
Into barges for the trip down. . . .

To jump from a 13-storey hotel
And assume a net,
as proof
That the way things work is
Not a projection of syntax. . . .

Excite I a map of my position
By means of lines,
adding
The date to a list of days,
With astronomical slowness. . . .

(An excerpt from a book-length work)



John Yau

THE VIEW FROM 166 AVENUE A: THE DRAWINGS OF ANTON van DALEN

In the late 60's Anton van Dalen visited the photographer Weegee, who was living in impoverished circumstances near Times Square. Weegee was by then a largely forgotten man. What inspired van Dalen to make the visit was Weegee's book, *Naked City*. This selection of photographs Weegee had taken for newspapers—he was the first to capture instances of urban violence—reinforced van Dalen's desire to record what he saw on the streets of New York. It was a desire he would start to bring to fruition in 1975, five years after he moved to Manhattan's Lower East Side with his wife and two young children.

Anton van Dalen was born in Amstelveen, Holland, in 1938. Among his earliest memories are bombed-out and gutted buildings, grim reminders of world War II. From 1952 to '54 he attended a graphics art school in Amsterdam. Later that year his family emigrated to Toronto, Canada. For the next decade van Dalen worked at a succession of jobs: in a wallpaper factory tracing patterns, art director of a leftist political magazine, designer of graphics and animated sequences for Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He also began exhibiting in various Canadian galleries by the early 60's.

However, like many other artists, van Dalen felt the tug of New York's energetic art world and moved there in 1967. Among the inspirations behind his decision were artists such as Andy Warhol, whose work was influenced by his training in graphics. While van Dalen had much in common with the Pop artists, both in his education and work experience, his art evolved along a different path. If we notice only the similarities van Dalen shares with his Pop Art

counterparts, his use of graphics, for example, we miss what engages him, the focus of his art.

Van Dalen is a diarist. His paintings, drawings, and shadow boxes are records of his life, both at home and in his neighborhood. Utilizing his graphics background, van Dalen has over the years developed a series of stylized motifs and images of himself, his family, pets, and the stark urban landscape they inhabit. Although I am concentrating only on the drawings he has made of his neighborhood, I do not wish this narrowing of focus to suggest that the rest of his art is not of equal accomplishment.

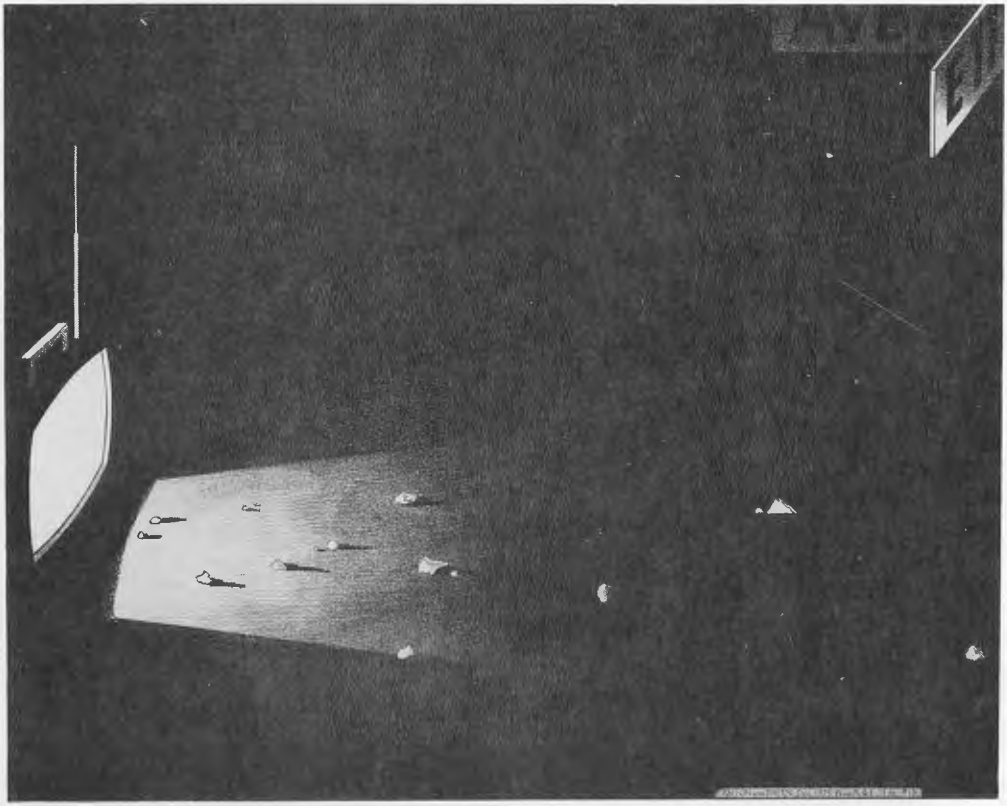
When van Dalen started hitting his stride in the early 70's, he had already decided that Pop Art's ironies and Minimalism's knowing dumbness were not for him. What gratification could they offer to someone homesteading on the Lower East Side, one block north of Tompkins Square? The art world's solipsism was out of sync with the precariousness of van Dalen's life. To be ironic about the banalities of American culture is to be an insider, someone who speaks from a privileged position. With his graphics background, van Dalen was in the perfect position to fit in, and he chose not to. At the same time, he did not, like Charles Bukowski, say, make his position as an outsider the focus of his art.

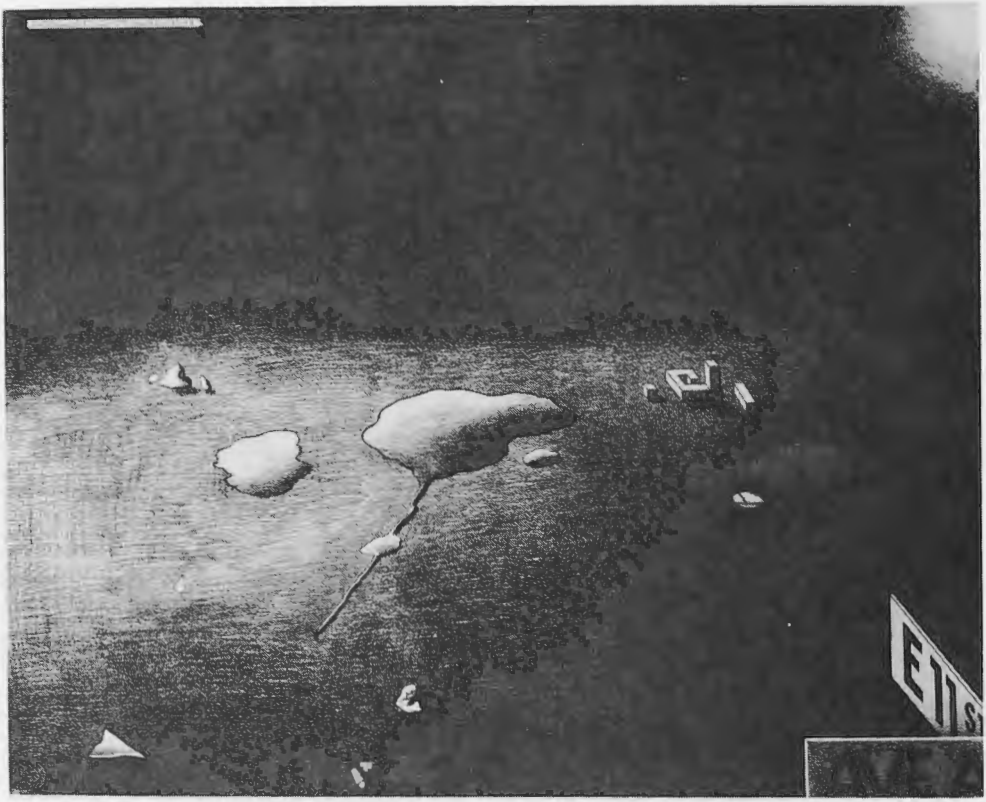
In his drawings, it is always somewhere between midnight and dawn. The view is angled down: we are either looking out the window or standing on the street, staring at what is lying in front of us or straight ahead. The scene is static, as if time was suspended. To introduce time into these drawings is to begin and finish the narrative. What the drawings reinforce is our sense of voyeurism, the curiosity we all have about what goes on in other parts of the city. Yet they are the opposite of *People* magazine.

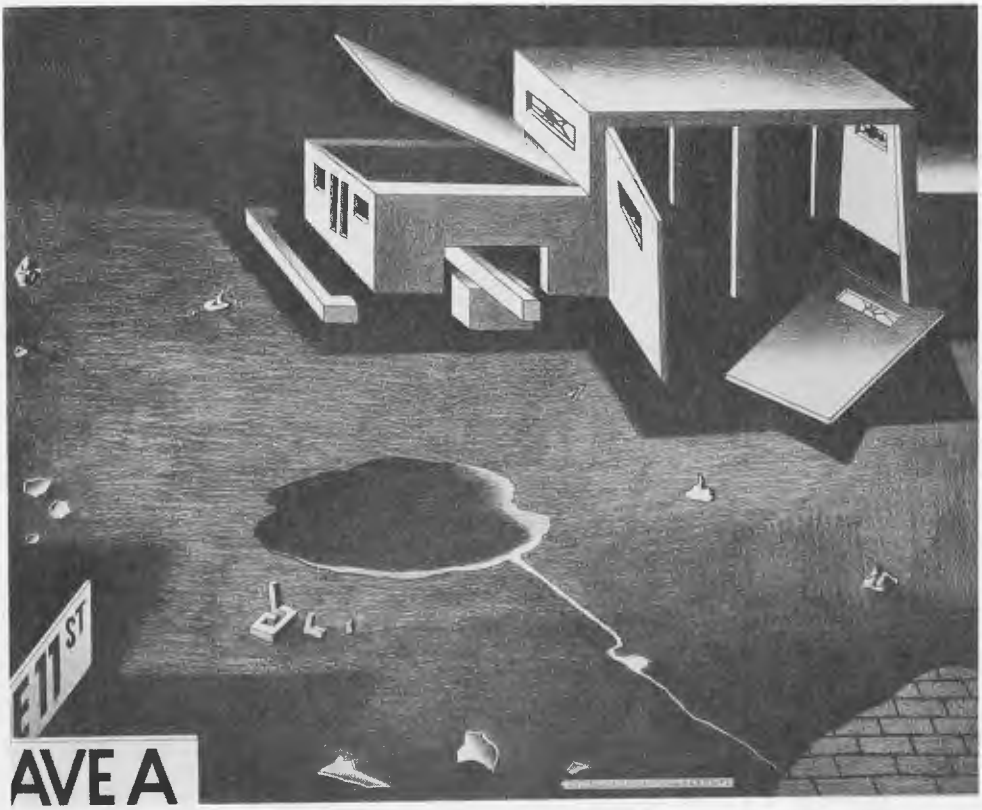
Like a long empty street at night, the drawings are fascinating and desolate, sensuous and bleak. Van Dalen's innocence is a knowing one. An abandoned car, a television illuminating a littered street, a puddle in front of us: these are some of the waste products of our society. To draw is to make a series of marks, much like the outline that traces where the murdered man once lay. Van Dalen is compelled to give evidence. He has a strong regard for geometry and a need to indicate exactly on what streets the event occurred. Everything is rendered in cooly detatched terms. Otherwise, he might be accused of trying to prejudice the jury.

Anton van Dalen

Photo credits: eeva-inkeri, Linda Impastato



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Alejandra Pizarnik

Translated from the Spanish by Susan Pensak

from ABOUT THE BLOODY COUNTESS

The criminal does not make beauty;
he himself is authentic beauty.

SARTRE

Valentine Penrose has collected documents and accounts about a real and unusual character: the Countess Bathory, murderer of 650 girls.*

An excellent poet (her first book carried a fervent preface by Paul Eluard), she has not separated her poetic gift from her precise erudition. Without altering painfully obtained real dates, she has rearranged them as a kind of vast and beautiful prose poem.

The sexual perversion and dementia of the Countess Bathory are so blatant that Valentine Penrose dissociates herself from them to concentrate exclusively on the convulsive beauty of the character.

*Valentine Penrose, *Erzébet Bathory: La Comtesse Sanglante*, Paris, 1963.

It is not easy to illustrate this kind of beauty. Valentine Penrose has succeeded, however, for she plays admirably with the esthetic values of this gloomy tale. Erzebet Bathory's *subterranean reign* is inscribed in the torture chamber of her medieval castle: there the sinister beauty of nocturnal creatures is absorbed in a silence of legendary pallor, demented eyes, hair the sumptuous color of ravens.

A well known philosopher included screams in the category of silence. Screams, panting, imprecations, form a "silent essence," which, in this cellar, is malefic. Seated on her throne, the countess watches torture and listens to screams. Her old and horrible servants are silent figures bringing fire, knives, needles, prods; torturing girls, later burying them. Like the prod or the knives, these ancients are instruments of a possession. This somber ritual has a single silent spectator.

CLASSICAL TORTURES

Fruits purs de tout outrage et
vierges de gerçures,
Dont la chair lisse et ferme
appelait les morsures!

BAUDELAIRE

Except for some baroque interferences such as "the Iron Maiden," death by water or the cage, the countess adhered to a monotonously classical style of torture that might be summarized like this:

Several tall, beautiful and resistant girls were chosen—their ages varied from 12 to 18 years old—and dragged to the torture chamber where the countess waited, dressed in white on her throne. Once their hands were tied, the servants whipped them until the skin was torn off their bodies and the girls transformed into *tumefact wounds*; they applied red hot pokers; they punctured the wounds; they performed incisions with razors (if the countess got tired of hearing the screams they sewed up their mouths; if some girl fainted too soon she was assisted by having paper soaked in oil burn between her legs). The blood sprang like a geiser and the white dress of the nocturnal lady was turned red. And so much so, that she had to go to her room and change into another (what was she thinking during this brief interruption?). The walls and the ceiling were also dyed red.

The lady didn't always remain idle while the rest of them bustled and hurried about her. At times she collaborated, and then, with great impetus, she tore off their flesh—in the most sensitive places—using tiny silver tweezers, applied red hot spoons and flatirons to the soles of their feet, she lashed them (in the course of a journey she ordered that a girl who had just died be held up on her feet and continued lashing her even though she was dead); she also made several of them die with ice water (an invention of her witch Davulia consisted of immersing a girl in cold water and leaving her drenched all night). Finally, when she got sick she had them brought to her bed and she bit them.

During her erotic crises, obscenities destined for the tortured ones escaped from her lips. Coarse imprecations and wolf howls were her expressive forms while, inflamed with passion, she covered the tenebrous circuit. But nothing was more terrifying than her laughter. (Summary: the medieval castle; the torture chamber; the tender girls; the old and dreadful servants; the beautiful hallucinator laughing from her perverse ecstacy provoked by another's suffering.)

. . . her last words, before slipping into the final swoon, were: "More, still more, harder!"

The day was not always innocent, the night guilty. During the daylight hours, young seamstresses brought dresses for the countess, and this was the occasion for numerous scenes of cruelty. Infallibly, Dorko found defects in the garments and selected two or three guilty ones (at this moment the lugubrious eyes of the countess began to shine). The little seamstresses' punishment—and that of the young servants in general—allowed for variations. If the countess was in one of her exceptional days of goodwill, Dorko was limited to undressing the guilty ones who continued working naked, under the countess's gaze, in the rooms full of black cats. The girls endured this painless sentence with distressed consternation as they would never have believed in its actual possibility. Unconsciously, they must have felt terribly humiliated, since their nudity inducted them into a kind of animal time heightened by the "human" presence of the perfectly dressed countess who contemplates them. This scene makes me think of Death: the one in the old allegories; the protagonist of the Dance of Death. Nudity is appropriate for Death. So is the incessant contemplation of the creatures dispossessed by her. But there is more: the sexual swoon forces us into

gestures and expressions of dying (palpitations and heavy breathing as in agony; sighs and groans wrested by the paroxysm). If the sexual act implies a kind of death, Erzebet Bathory needed the visible death, elemental, brutal, in order to be able to die, on her part, of this figurative death that becomes orgasm. But who is Death? It is the Lady who consumes and devastates however and wherever she wants. Yes, and this is, moreover, a possible definition of the Countess Bathory. No one ever really wants to grow old, that is: to die. Perhaps that is why she represented and embodied Death. Because, how can Death die?

Let us return to the little seamstresses and servants. If Erzebet awoke irascible, she did not content herself with living pictures but:

To the one who had stolen a coin the same coin was paid . . . red hot from the fire, which the girl had to clutch in her palm.

To the one who had talked a lot during working hours, the countess herself sewed up her mouth or, conversely, opened her mouth and stretched it until the lips were torn off.

She also used a poker, with which, arbitrarily, she burned cheeks, breasts, tongues . . .

When those punished were executed in Erzebet's room it became necessary, at night, to spread great quantities of ash around her bed so that the noble lady could cross the vast pools of blood without difficulty.

THE MIRROR OF MELANCHOLY

All is mirror!

OCTAVIO PAZ

. . . *she lived in front of her great somber mirror, the famous mirror whose model she had designed herself* . . . It was so comfortable that it offered some projections upon which the arms could rest so that one could remain before it for several hours without tiring. We can surmise that having thought to design a mirror, Erzebet sketched the plans for her home. And now we understand why only the most captivatingly sad music of her gypsy orchestra or the dangerous hunting parties or the violent perfume of magic herbs in the witch's shed or—

above all—the flooded cellars of human blood could kindle something like a living aspect in the eyes of her perfect face. Because no one has more thirst for earth, blood and brutal sexuality than these creatures that inhabit cold mirrors. And on the subject of mirrors: rumors about the countess's homosexuality could never be clarified, not knowing whether it concerned an unconscious tendency or whether, on the contrary, she accepted it naturally, as one more right that belonged to her. Essentially, she lived submerged in an exclusively feminine sphere. There were only women in her nights of crime. Some details then are obviously revealing: for example, in the torture chamber, in the moments of maximum tension, she herself used to thrust a flaming taper into the victim's genitals. There are also testimonies that speak of a less solitary lust. One servant affirmed that an aristocratic and mysterious lady dressed as a young man used to visit the countess. On one occasion she discovered them together, torturing a girl. But whether they shared pleasures other than the sadistic isn't known.

I continue with the theme of the mirror. Although it doesn't have much to do with *explaining* this sinister figure, it is necessary to pause on the matter of what was responsible for the ills of the 16th century: melancholy.

An unchanging color governs the melancholic: his interior is a space the color of mourning; nothing and no one transpires there. It is a scene without ornamentation where the inert ego is assisted by the ego that suffers from this inertia. The latter wishes to free the prisoner, but any attempt fails as Theseus would have failed if, besides being himself, he had been the Minotaur as well; to kill him, then, would have required killing himself. But there are fleeting remedies: sexual pleasures, for example, can, for a brief time, erase the silent gallery of echos and mirrors that is the melancholic soul. And more than that: to the extent of being able to illuminate that precinct in mourning and transform it into a kind of little music box with figures of vivid and joyful colors that dance and sing delightfully. Later, when the fuse is burned out, it will have to return to motionlessness and silence. The little music box is not a gratuitous method of comparison. I believe that melancholy is, finally, a musical problem: a dissonance, an off rhythm. While *outside* everything happens with the vertiginous rhythm of a cascade, *inside* there is an exhausted slowness of one drop of water falling on the next. So that that *outside* observed from the melancholic *inside* becomes absurd and unreal and constitutes "the farce we all have to perform." But for an instant—whether it be through a savage music, or some

drug, or the sexual act in its maximum violence—the slowed down rhythm of the melancholic does not only come to agree with the external world, but surpasses it with an unspeakably happy excess; and the ego vibrates animated with delirious energies.

To the melancholic time is manifested as a suspension of its passing—actually, there is a passing, but its slowness evokes the growing nails of the dead—which precedes and continues the fatally ephemeral violence. Between two silences or two deaths, the prodigious and fleeting velocity, clothed in varying forms that go from innocent intoxication to sexual perversions and even to crime. And I think of Erzebet Bathory and of her nights whose rhythm measured the screams of adolescents. The book that I am glossing in these notes carries a portrait of the countess: the beautiful and somber lady looks like the allegory of melancholy shown in the old engravings. I want to keep in mind, likewise, that in her epoch a melancholic meant one possessed by the devil.

EXTREME MEASURES

. . . la loi, froide par elle-même,
ne saurait être accessible aux
passions qui peuvent légitimer
la cruelle action du meurtre.

SADE

For six years the countess murdered with impunity. In the course of those years, the darkest rumors about her had not ceased to flow. But the Bathory name, not only illustrious but actively protected by the Hapsburgs, terrified the likely informants.

By 1610 the king had the most sinister reports—along with proofs—about the countess. After long vacillations he decided to take extreme measures. He entrusted the mighty palatine Thurzo to investigate the melancholy acts at Csejthe castle and to punish the guilty one.

Thurzo arrived at the castle unannounced, accompanied by his armed men. He found, in the cellar, disorganized from the bloody ritual of the night before, a beautiful mutilated corpse and two girls in agony. That is not all. He drew

in the stench of corpses; he looked at the bloodstained walls; he saw "the Iron Maiden," the cage, the instruments of torture, the vats of dried blood, the cells—in one of them a group of girls who were waiting their turn to die and told him that after many days of fasting they had been served a certain roasted meat that had belonged to the beautiful bodies of their dead companions . . .

The countess, without denying Thurzo's accusations, declared that *all that was her right as a noblewoman of high rank*. To which the palatine responded: . . . *I condemn you to perpetual imprisonment inside your castle*.

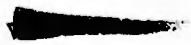
In his heart, Thurzo would have said that the countess ought to be beheaded, but such an exemplary punishment would have excited the reprobation not only of the Bathorys but of nobles in general. Meanwhile, a notebook was found in the countess's room covered in her handwriting with the names and particular signs of her victims, which there totaled 610 . . . As for Erzebet's attendants, he indicted them, they confessed to incredible acts, and they died in the bonfire.

The prison rose up around her. The doors and windows of her room were walled in. An abject grill was installed in one wall through which food could be passed to her. *And when all was completed four scaffolds were erected in the corners of the castle to signal that there lived one condemned to die*.

Thus she lived for more than three years, almost dead from cold and hunger. She never evinced repentance. She never understood why they condemned her. On August 21, 1614, a chronicler of the epoch wrote: *She died toward nightfall, abandoned by everyone*.

She wasn't afraid, she never trembled. Therefore, no compassion or emotion or admiration for her. Only a staying in suspense at the excess of horror, a fascination for the white dress that turned red, for the idea of an absolute licentiousness, for the evocation of a silence starred by screams where everything was the image of an unacceptable beauty.

Like Sade in his writings, like Gilles de Rais in his crimes, the Countess Bathory reached, beyond all limits, the final depth of wantonness. She is one more proof that the absolute freedom of the human creature is horrible.



Clayton Eshleman

A NOTE ON BERNARD BADOR'S POETRY

Bernard Bador's poetry to date is surely one of the most unique bodies of work to have been influenced by a range of French poetry that begins with Lautremont, passes through Tzara and the various Surrealist strategies of the 20s and 30s, and, for Bador, culminates in the poetry of St. John Perse. While Bador acknowledges Perse as his most prominent predecessor, in the poetry of the latter it is as if Perse's galleons of light and renewal are suddenly sucked down into the still, black sheen of a petrified whirlpool. Bernard Bador's poetry evokes faceless lakes of stillbeing, grids of flashing lesions, and a garroted apocalypse resplendent with repugnant urges. There is an appetite for slivers here, a special morbidity that recalls the sensibilities of the German poets Georg Trakl and Gottfried Benn (especially the Benn of the lugubrious and slashing *Morgue* poems), where one finds such images as mice building a nest in the belly of a little girl whose murdered corpse was left in a ditch.

If such an image were to appear in a Bador poem, even the consistency of natural disintegration would be warped. The mice might be pregnant with flies, and the little girl, still alive (like one of Hans Bellmer's violated waifs), might be watching the mice, gagged with a cross of excrement. Anticipation of natural event in Bador is always rudely detoured, but at the point that conflicting images start to melt into senselessness, meaning again raises its head, even if wearing its own brain like a perverse tiara.

By locating Bador's writing in a vein that is more Eastern European than French or even German (the world of Vladimir Holan in contrast to that of Paul Eluard), I am actually moving toward the poet's own roots. Bernard Bador is not merely

of Hungarian ancestry, but a descendant of the noble Bathory family, which not only included governors and princes of 16th and 17th century Transylvania, but in those gloomy mountains drained of light from whose folds issued werewolves and mandrakes, the Countess Erzsébet Báthory (1560-1614), a one woman "death camp," who is on record as having hideously tortured and slaughtered over 600 virgins in order to renew her youth by bathing in their blood.

While Bador can hardly be said to have been dominated by a particular ancestor who lived 400 years ago, the coagulated and demonic power in Erzsebet's image appears to have influenced, or flown into, his immediate background so as to effect the nature of his soul, and thus his poetry. I am not one to smirk at the possibility that unappeased, "hungry ghosts" continue to travel the branchings of a family tree until finding a food source, or release, in a particular descendent.

In Bador's poetry at large, and, as I will point out, particularly in his title for this selection, I think it is possible that Erzsébet's seemingly unappeasible hunger for an eroticized mayhem has subsided—as water might in a landscape, leaving the eroded shapes that make up this poetry. Or to put it slightly differently: such hunger has here taken on the form of static, compact stanzas that as their contents are examined begin to resemble plates of cold funeral meats. I can perfectly well imagine Erzsébet's psyche fluttering about these stanzas, nibbling here, sipping there, finding enough death to preoccupy and distract her from what must have seemed to be an endless, ravenous flight through Bathory/Bador progeny.

One reason that I feel this way is that there is no sense of personal experience in Bernard Bador's poetry. The experience is ancestral. Shafts of dusty light reach back to migrations and caravans, to Buddhistic and Hinduistic images, which is to say: a sense of the universe is present. However, it is present as detritus. In contrast to the world of Perse, in which event is always contoured with the rainbow hues of so many stories, in Bador there is incessant entropic closure. Each stanza is an orphan, a little isolated isle, with only possible ties to the one that is found before or behind it. Momentary evocations of grandeur are abruptly doublecrossed by torture, disembowelment, and abortion. Reading him is like watching little pieces being broken off from stories and collaged in such a way that omnipotency and impotency are like grooved pipes that screw into each other perfectly.

What makes these poems unique is the way in which they utilize various Surrealist strategies (especially black humor, Objective Hazard, and the estrangement of sensation) without edging in under the canopy of an established Surrealist voice. The extent to which there is any voice at all is questionable. It might be more accurate to say that these are voiceless, breathless poems, poems in which the words do not seem to be uttered, rhythmless words, words more like bric-a-brac or flea market finds. At the same time these words are highly self-conscious of the way they sound. While poems do "open" and "close," the cuts and cauterizations in discrete stanzas are more significant than any thematic development.

The image of sea urchin harakiri, of a sea urchin inflicting death upon itself, using its spines as medieval Japanese samurai ritually disemboweled themselves, has an odd resonance with one of Erzsébet Báthory's most notorious contraptions, her custom-made clockwork Iron Maiden which she herself designed.

By touching the necklace of encrusted stones that ran in a loop down over the chest, the victim set everything in motion. From the interior of the flesh-color painted iron figure would issue the noise of moving clockwork. Arms would raise and embrace whoever was in reach; where the painted breasts were, two shutters slid sideways, the chest opened, and five daggers slowly emerged, stabbing the girl clasped in the embrace. As other gems in the necklace were pressed, the arms fell away and the eyes clicked shut. The girl's blood was collected in a pot and then poured over the Countess who sat upright in an armchair permanently installed in the underground chamber.

Bador's sea urchin chamber tropes Erzsébet's "virgin press," with the exception, of course, that the image of sea urchin harakiri does not imply a victim other than the sea urchin itself. But if we think of "sea urchin harakiri" as a way of processing images, then the world of the past, the migrations and caravans etc., become Bador's virgins. What runs into the sea urchin's catchment, or better, what this poet pours over us in a gleeful mockery of his aunt's absurd obsession are "cadaver cracks in the lotus pond," "predatory shipwrecks," "a caterpillar laying the droppings of our orphan cries," as well as "decapitated stones," and "mincemeat swarming with scabs."

Bernard Bador

from SEA URCHIN HARAKIRI

Translated from the French
by Clayton Eshleman

PROGRESS

Jacaranda blindings
heightened by summer's ponderous cymbals.

The melody slinks off to die
under a rolling-mill of potato bugs,
ardent myosoti spouses.

Under the flashings,
faceless sucklings
are flaying the dancers.

The turbulent macaw mutism
is quartered on a wheel of main-jibs
swollen with bear bites.

Tristan Tzara tramples the sacred wells
of the peacock butterflies
scythed by shamrock machetes.

At the call of the termite totems,

pastel blue moray eels
begin to lay tides,
popping sleigh-bells
under the murmuring of heraldic sables.

Ah charisma of deluges!
Hand-to-hand of turgescent mud
into which asphyxiated
walruses are plunging their tusks.

CADAVER CRACKS IN THE LOTUS POND

The sun concludes
in the fountain of tablas,
a lacework of gems bedizened with bones
rusting under the drunken iodine of the idols.

At the call of the lavendars,
doubt encircles the migratory dusks,
serene mutilations before the port.

From Varanasi to Jaangira
a sadhu hypnotizes the Ganges,
a paralysis of flowers and cremation scents
in view of beardless carrion eaters.

The earth slips
between the fangs of the gods,
horns of plenty,

Drowned man,
reopen the wrought anemone gate,

a tentacular blood of lunar ablutions.

In the shadow of a dot,
the third eye reddens,
an acrid almond wandering the snow.

A living cryptogram
of caverns on the flanks of birds
condemned to the frigid vertigo of cascades.

How break this curtain of eyes?
Abandon of a sacrilegious hand
on the pointed phallus of hardened resins.

Cadaver cracks
in the lotus pond,
cries floating the golden lobes.

The volcano has petrified the female incense of a smile,
couplings of millenial entrails
ripened in the tamed silence.

A new hand
lifts the horizon up mane-high.
Ah the galloping of the poles!

Suffering stoops the nettles
deprived of cathedrals,
but who recalls the rugose acanthi
of the zodiac, a forger's leprosy
or a galaxy toll-booth?

Between two eternities
a rutilant garuda encourages
the elephant who has forgotten the forest.

Weighed down under useless gold,
the high priest of images condemns

the snow cult,
a one-eyed skeleton of Cabalistic abortions.

Tortures greedy for sounds,
a herbarium raked by sleep on fire,
under the embers
a rose is devouring the wart hog.
O safari of ejaculatory prayers!

In the nick
of time, the moon, a torque of green harps,
liberates the suave thunderbolt,
a delirium of transparent scarabs.

A CAPE OF WILD FLIES

Beyond the silent aurochs-haunted forests,
victims give birth to victims,
white she-wolf jaws crush
the black lord's

epileptic sleigh on the powdery
sand of summer, sand
promised to the horse blood drinkers.
The multiple odyssey under each step!

A hardened rainbow shelters the tarot players
whose fauve oil faces long to crush
the trembling she-mummies
scratching at the surfaceless sheer walls.

Bloodsplashed palettes of eyes.
The fine nerves we entangle in concrete clouds.

After all, the moon does
menstruate on the shadows of our limp

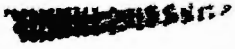
members and bonzai willows dot
the weary fur of our retinas.
Her eyelids hung with nightshade
stuffed bats, her sheets

wet with the blood of virgins,
the royal harpy again and again
yields to peaty crusades of orgasms.
The juice of marine snails

germinated on Uranus streams
from the sex of icy stones
while witches from the Karpaths
annoint the Countess' vaginal chasm.

In the darkness of underground wash houses,
hordes of infuriated, trilobite-fringed
fledglings immerse themselves in the storm graffiti
chiselled in our limestone lungs.

(*Note:* This poem was written in English & edited by Clayton Eshleman)



Robert Peters

from THE BLOOD COUNTESS

This young body
existed nowhere
before I jammed it into an urn

huntress of moon-rind breasts
huntress of stricken black eyes
huntress of glass slivers, smashed mirrors
huntress of the vulva
huntress of patellas smeared with hemoglobin compote
huntress of powdered opal and beryl swirled in hot wine
huntress of spurts, the diphthongs of lust
frozen cream on frosty boudoir casements.

Who beats my door?
An Avenging Angel! An Avenging Angel!

Yes, where was I?

I am a woman who rails
at being a woman.

Limpid eyes on moth wings
swamp-odors, body-sweat,
cow-udders, urine-drenched children.

My beauty is a squash rind
scraped of its pulp,

a shield
against the moon's terrors.

beautiful women numb me
pulsations of the bath, of groin and womb,
skin robes camel-flanks ocelot throats scented.
I despise beasts.
Where there is splendor there is disease
The roadway to the castle floods
this morning, torrents down the mountain
(The quintet plays Palestrina)
exhausted doves cower on the river bank

"Madame loves Palestrina? Would she hear more?
A late motet?"

More candles . . .
near the bass viol. Fine. Fine. I love the sheen!

* * *

Bovine women cough. Their breasts shake like enormous lake-slugs (I am told they are huge in the Caspian Sea). I could throttle these throats, cough-sounds as air-pockets in a throat-pudding. Turn the marbled throat towards the framed boudoir door. Death has easy lessons, barbed ferules and ether-drenched silks. There's always a window tainted with red sun-light, or a window blackened with a pimpled devil's tongue thrust up against it.

How ironic! a pink lady's-slipper (Cypripedium acaule) hangs forth with a sac resembling the male scrotum. I prefer the common bull thistle (Cirsium lanceolatum), despite its name, for it boasts a tuft of purple hairs and a thorny pod, resembling the female parts from which it springs. My favorite flower, after, of course, the camellia and the rose, is the iris, its labial petals, the texture, so like the satin inside a woman's mouth. Babies tumble forth from calyxes. I enclasp my own pregnant belly. Sinew is never the answer.

* * *

Mirror,
You pretzel-twisted monstrosity
wrought from oak limbs bleached,
with polished gnarls, knobs,
and other crudities.
A reflection is never identical with the image reflected.

I hang for hours despising you.

My pallor—and I swoon
watching the candlelight—
attracts other highborn Ladies.
Exotic women flaunt their wrists.
I smother them in fleece
unleash a timber-wolf.
The wolf is rampant, a breast-eater.

Satan, nip the teats of these hags!
Coins of misery!
Snow, hail, and rain.

Their images, left behind, despoil mine.
I have ordered all mirrors stacked
facing walls!

Blood dries on the glass.
Bloody scales fall off.
Blood-flakes in an alabaster bowl,
delicious, spiked with wine, cinnamon,
and a dash of cream.

Beneath my skin there's a glow.
I love you *Imago*.
Darkened lives birth a paradox of strangers.

I breathe better.
the abysmal pitch crased forever
Diana in a shower of blood!)

A reflection is never identical with the image reflected.

* * *

Exhausted flesh.
Clogged streams and rivers.
Toads on their backs on the
garden path. Light devours everything.
Dark confusion, slack shadows
crammed with fangs and spears.
I long for more continuity, why am I as I
am/was? Nothing is changed. Flowers
into glass, vertebrae into fossils,
tears into crystals. The world
is noxious. I am admired,
adorned with violets.
(Play more Pretorious).
At variance with myself?
(Palestrina, *encore*).
A virgin wearing Lady Macbeth's cincture . . .
Venus on her shell . . .
I prefer hot cream.
Tomorrow I shall slice off a nose.
Pig roasting, damp goose feathers, a lover's breath.

* * *

The more a brain sizzles, the more extensive the cortextual slime. You shall never, Robert, understand murder. I baffle you, wearing my chastity-apron with skull and cross-bones and a Mason's trowel, Black Sabbath bat-wings and

ganglia. Someday, as abruptly as I began my ascent into blood, I shall fall. You'll probably snigger when I do, you're that heartless. So, cast your dogged flashlight all you please. A mere wafer-thin wedge of me abuts on your sidewalk.

* * *

The bullseye. The gerfalcon's hare. A girl raped
by a gaggle of farmboys. Blood is a swirl of drowned mice, wheat
beard husks, and atoms of intellect (the latter, lepidoptera or
frog eggs in a jellied mass). Blood swirls in my mouth. A waxy
plant with blood-fruit sprouts from my navel.

* * *

All afternoon the fireplace is warm. Blood in the fur tub is warmed. I bathe until green shadows strike the room from unexpected directions. It is time for prayers. Blood beads rush down my body as I step forth onto a pale blue fur rug, am received by old Dorko holding out a warmed sheepskin. The afternoon shimmers with golden wool. "Save her blood," I say. "I am younger now. I am quite far from shore."

* * *

From bath to mirror
swan, vampire, fritillary

there is no parable
images on an arras in a great hall

swan, fritillary, vampire

my resplendent body
rose chaplet, bath water, breath mist

fritillary, vampire, swan

Eros, chubby boy wrinkled,

like an ancient countess' neck

swan, vampire, fritillary

The Book of the Bath
margins and a warm hearth

fritillary, vampire, swan

angels, pears ripen.
fruit-embossed mirror. pomegranate
in a cluster of pears at the top.
a brain for a shepherdess

swan, fritillary, vampire.

Here, nothing is unsung.
I fear hot coals, blazing chiffoniers
the frozen weir, the she-wolf's lair

swan, fritillary, vampire

I am Venus. I trust my chilled
beauty, my limpid eyes.
I am Medusa!

vampire, fritillary, swan.

* * *

Halt the carriage!
Conceal it behind that heap of snow.

Fine, that's fine.

Wipe the frozen blood from my face. I had not
intended to stab her so deeply. Slap her, Dorko.
Waken her. I loathe her moaning.

I'll have hot wine before proceeding. How

beautifully the pond steams. By evening it
will be frozen.

Remove her skin-slippers
Why shouldn't she tremble?

Dump her from the carriage. Now! Now!
Tie her to that spruce.

Girl, you won't recall this.
As you turn to ice you'll numb.

Drench her!

Fold her arms. Shut her mouth,
no pearly howlings. She's visible as a shimmer.
She's a chess-piece of ice.

Fetch her to the castle yard, drape her in
appleblossoms when she melts. We need
her blank face, her purple eyes, her svelte ice-thighs.
The cabriolet roof is burning!
I create this weather!

Jerome Rothenberg

BLOOD RIVER SHAMAN CHANT

Nenets

then grasped
my sky tree grasped it
all my friends
would bend their backs to me
they sprang up to their feet
then stretched me on their laps
"now I must harness the sky's reindeer
"the smallest of the seven
"must hold to the reindeer's reins
cloud island sledge
shot off we found
the grass ridge
there at the ridge's foot we found
a hill with lawns
bored through by seven lizards
who bored through it
"mother lizard grandmother
"give thou a child
"a child give to my friend
the lizard child my friend
bored through my side
we found the ice ridge then
& at its side

found a blood river
the blood river started flowing
its currents started flowing
in the currents the blood river
tufts of hair flowed by
for me to cut to cut the river
with bare hands
would make the blood stop
the river & the current stop
until we crossed the river
& the blood we found
the iron tent
I went into the iron tent
the seven women sat there
I embraced them seven women
swaddling seven boys
cloud island sledge
shot off again it took us
to our tent
"I must unhitch
"our spirit reindeer
"the smallest of the seven
"I must head back to camp
"my friends must head back
"of the seven let a single one remain
then they took back my sky tree
left me I have found no place
to camp but here
inside this fire I fall
to pieces

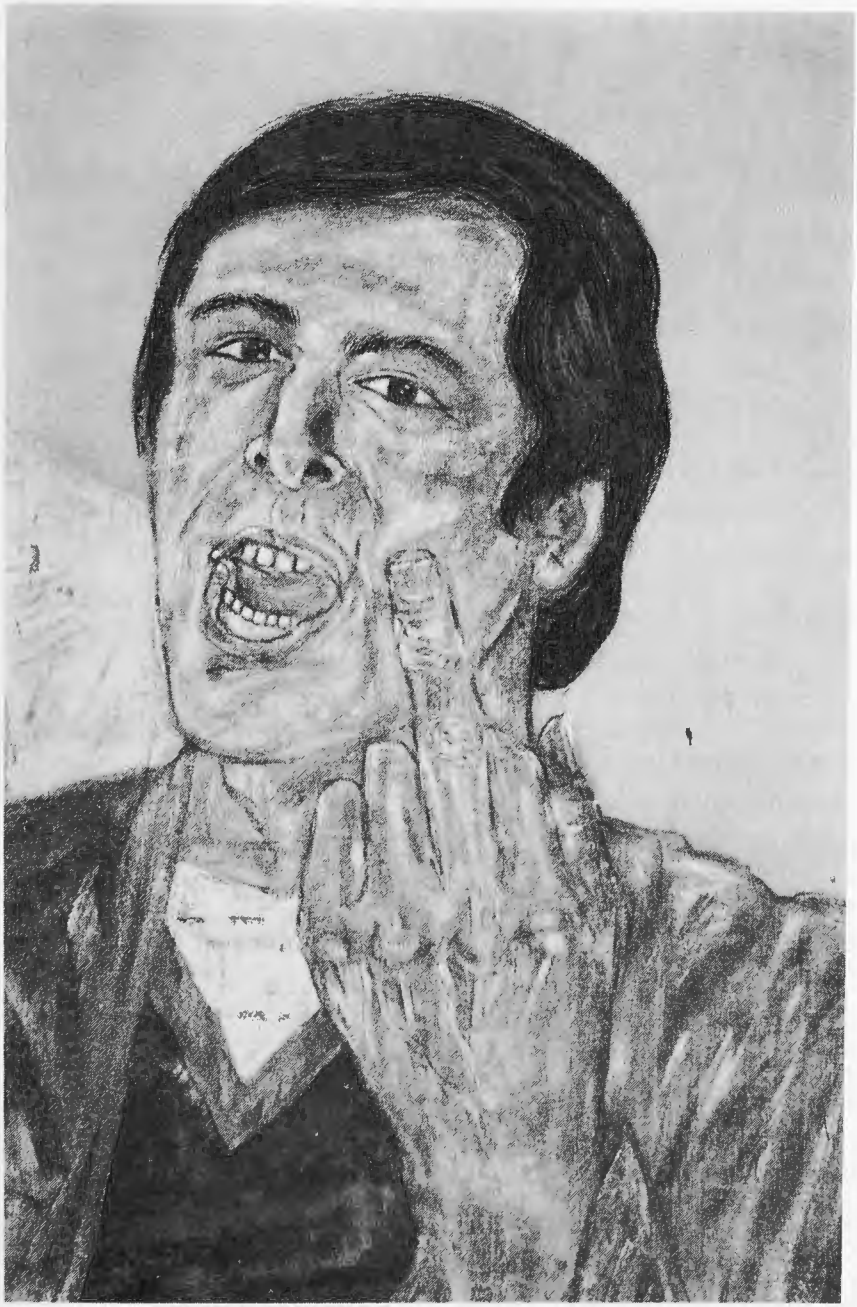
At midpoint of the ceremony the shaman (who sings it here) enters the "deep dive" of trance by slashing at his body with a knife. Source (through M.A. Castren, December 1842): the Nenets: a Finno-Ugric people living on the tundra between northeastern Europe & northwestern Siberia.

Leon Golub

"Riot II," 1984
120x124"

Detail *"Riot II,"* 1984

Courtesy of Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York
Photos: David Reynolds



Detail *"Riot II,"* 1984

Jackson Mac Low

GIANT OTTERS

They were a close family of giant otters
in Surinam giving a low growling sound when
they were insecure so they were called the Hummers.

Trace elements had landed near them and they effloresced
in even amounts throughout an even eon and an evening more
fortunate as they were in knowing nothing

or peering curiously into unknowable presence
alert to no future living the past as presence
whose elements were traces in their efflorescing being

going as far as they could within the world they were
as fortune particularized occasions within unfolding
breathed upon by memory's wraith and anticipation's all but absence.

Where were they going but farther along and through
whatever their being eventuated in clearness no demand for clarity
as the eyes are unsealed and the world flows in as light?

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR

Much more than they did the bombing what they ended
up speaking about was not the nuclear plants but war
when people aren't nice to each other any more
locked up in attics with death threatening them every minute.

Only crazy people can do this after several years of studying the victims
believing themselves nonexistent leaving them an abiding feeling
that they could not escape the consciousness of death
becoming convinced that life is unmanageable if not absurd.

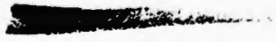
The rise of narcissism may reflect underlying death anxiety
arousing a feeling of "I don't want one if others can't have one"
or pure self-interest reflected in newly accepted attitudes
not having knowledge or skills to overcome their helplessness.

Responding to the question "Do you care?" negatively
what then can they base their analysis of adversary behavior upon
even if they are interested in asking questions
to the extent of raising doubts as to the solidity of floors?

To objectively quantify the effects of these impressions
despite the fear of having to surrender in any way whatsoever
find a technological breakthrough not only the result of chance
with all of that throw weight confined to restricted areas.

The tendency to become more self-centered by no means
increases capacity to work together to further survival
before the survivors are so overwhelmed as not to be able to act
in any coherent manner to bring about a change in awareness or direction.

Some question the preoccupation with children's reactions to tales of
wonder and horror
and to the burden of feeling that one may die one day at any moment now
but one questions what the questioners' underlying attitudes might be
knowing that one cannot rely upon the education and reeducation
of leaders.
There seems to be no picture in people's minds as to what that really means
but if we get a huge truck pasted up with pictures of the victims
our whole consciousness of what will await us will be altered inexorably
teaching us how to break through the wall of denial above the heads of
all governments.



Stephen Rodefer

IMITATION W

Logically there can not be a mistake ever. But when a mistake occurs, illogically there it is.

One fact will always picture another, because of its spatial existence in a duration. The world is otherwise the fallacy.

An affair is independent of another affair. Russell is wrong but frank.

All true sexual relations concern unity, or they become other than sexual relations.

One fact will always picture another of course, but can Russell be both frank and wrong?

Or do I mean we should collect our given aspects and burn them, like early works?

New writing contains propositions not considered before. Language costumes character, disguising just another person.

Tacit conventions can be complicated ad infinitem. Is there possibly a machine which playing the record can write the score?

Or does depiction itself deconstruct? Italics in German for starters; letter space for example in English.

What is ancient Greek the modern language of? For they are all of them gone, and like a living table one name stands for another.

No thing goes unnamed. Grammar is propositional. It strives to reveal position by sitting on the face of meaning.

Nothing is black or white, but color makes it so. Colorless promotes everything, but none at all.

Psychology is nervous clarity, of which most again will always the same be gone. *You* will live.

Sharp clothes, like knives, dress otherwise livid meat, if evolution is true.

Masturbation is the absence of philosophy, it insists on anarchy, but nicely retreats.

There are many zeros, but every yesterday was a new day too. Ask not what will be next but what is already following.

Any variable can be formalized. It is unthinkable that any relation should not stand in that relation.

If *a* cannot equal *b*, no way can it *a* equal either. Any end is always near.

Any tautology will contradict itself in time. The torso will be striped.

It does not matter who rejects. Combinations produce. So does everyone wish to be paid to propose.

Oft spring lies, as it must, the exact potential of an infinitude of summers. Elementary school eventually graduates.

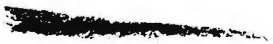
Illiteracy a form of unrewarded genius of which the streets produce the language, called *Street*.

Nothing retreats. Not everything, but many things follow. Every thing works.

Falsehood can form a series with truth, will always have. There is no way to tell true or false when all cases happen partially.

Clearly the past does not portray the future, but when, as almost always, it claims to, there can be no present.

Only this, only that, only this.



George Evans

A RENAISSANCE DRUNK

They never read their Hedylos, nor could,
where he sings how sweet was Sokles
in his cups, how he wrote better for it,

or the sot Santoka:

The leaves drop (horohoro
weaving down drunk
from their trees

Beauty.
I am the leaves.

The shape of the traveler
in the puddle is the traveler
or in the wine,

walking, balancing a dragonfly
on his hat,

threading and stepping lightly
over shadows in the pines.

THE DRESSER

Bumping lamps, chairs,
cords crushed in nap, barefoot
to tools spread there:

a continent, a body.
Calloused hands brushing ear
and finger jewelry too small

to grip just touch and knock
about looking down. A tiny land.
What do I know,

believed for bullshit, love,
position, truth rarely
this world so tamed

it sets gold & near-gold
by a mirror
believing it doubled.

Why should you believe
anything. You
should not. Come into

the field. Look. At
the paintbrush the
click beetle the face

you decorate
do not decorate
from fear.

WORKING FOR THE ICEMAN

He slams the ice down
small chips fly into yr eyes
but melt before he beats yr ass
for crying neon hums
bugs explode on lights & you pass chunks
to those chasing the truck before he catches
on & Pleiades is up there the burlap
sacks he puts on his shoulder
flap in the wind the North Star the Bear
& Venus are out there
somewhere in the daylight & later
you'll turn white & die
but now it's nothing you're young
and believe he needs you

ISLANDS

Whales. Whales.
Wouldja wouldja

kill yr mother
wouldja

eat
yr friend.

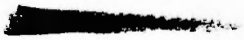
Islands rise
from the sea,

islands rise
from the mountain,

islands from
the tree,

wouldja wouldja
eat yr brother,

islands rise
from thee.



Paul Christensen

THE NAP

This year the working classes demand shades of green; green sofas and green cars, long dark coats in which women stand like old copper statues waiting for buses to department stores, where rack after rack of green dresses will be sorted by their raw fingers. Green rugs, green dead eye of the tv in its dark corner. My green shirt, socks, the boy with green hair, as if everyone were dying from a new disease which only green could cure: green envy, green peace, the greening of the conquerors after atomic war. The green delirium of winter, the new green blackboard at my school; a green temperature of constant progress, the greening acceleration of a prosperous year. The green glow of a cold war, for this is the middle passage of the 1950s, as I report my thoughts to the world during one of my mother's longer naps.

She would go soft, then softer,
until she was a teardrop hanging
at the dark spout of the room,
and things would fall softly into
place, like shadows flung out of a
cotton spread. I could feel the walls
turning into flesh, breathing through
their outlets and old lamps; rooms
that hollowed like open mouths,
then curved slowly into pouts.
By then, she was dozing. And the
street went on beside the house,
with storybook brown trucks, men
in their bakery and ice cream uniforms,

women in faded flowered dresses standing
in the wind, hair flowing with wind,
their voices coming and going
as they took in parcels, or unlimbered
shopping bags and caught the bus.

The sky looked colder with its faded sun.
The houses were a jumble of black
pieces, like shale tumbling into a
blue river full of ice.
I thought I saw a burglar's fox eyes
peering at me through the bathroom skylight,
the room narrow and cold with porcelain,
his eyes parting and entering my scalp
until I shivered loose and ran.
As in every other napping house,
nothing troubled the standstill of time.
Only a neighbor's moody laughter
seeped through the mortar of the party wall.
Then the glazed face of a woman
across the alley emerged from the prism
of her small, clean window, shaking
her mop—looking at me with blouse
unbuttoned and white slender neck,
as I came nearer to the glass.
Her face lured me out of childhood,
stretched me from my skin into a
taut cord, my bones quivering to fly
if only . . . only she had not smiled
and disappeared again.

Here things rise
brick by brick like monuments; every move
obeys some law. Tinkle of dinner; rasp
of night, ticking clocks that explode

each morning's quiet. The grease sizzling
in countless pans; dark closets hung
with winter suits. Squared edges, the
intersection throbbing with caution lights,
as cars nosed forward into the bleak
channels of the city. I fan my fingers
in the cold hall, at the bottom of the
stairs, hoping to provoke a miracle—
one unopened bud of rose out of the blood
and knuckles of my empty hands. Nothing
but the dark appears, its own dreary bloom
of disappointment. I pocket the rest
of my endless chances, humming and shuffling
from window to window. My heart is a mossy
stone; my brain like a crater on the moon,
its one impact with heaven forgotten.
Drifting; a sort of dance without music,
tiny leaps, turns in the gray leaf-
patterns of the rug, between two end-
tables, doilied and clean, sad memorial
things handed down. I spit into the
still life of vased flowers midway
up the stairs, evil illusion of an
actual world—and shove my hips
against the wall flattening me into
manhood in a few more years.

She mutters in her sleep—turning me,
back from my rebellious hopes. A mouth
in the woods, under the dark trees
a pair of lips the color of black water,
telling me the woods are cursed, life spoiled.
Then snores, rushing me down the steps
to the upholstered chair, its wings spread

out against the threat of war.

Sonship,
the filial role; clabber that becomes
her boy, incontinent and bawling
in his barred crib upstairs.
Asthmatic and lunar, already snaggle-
toothed and chinless, her second
or third prize of the litter.
One of her jewels, she always said.
Born in the ejaculation of guns
of war, a mortar pumped from her own
chute into a swaddle propped in the
old Plymouth, dipping in the city's ruts
homeward to his sooty first day
on the job. A warm tit erect and
rubbery on his soft, unwilling lip,
squeezing the thin suety milk until
his belly drummed. Tantrums
in the yellow kitchen, the tomb-
shaped darkness of unlit rooms he bobbed
between upon his father's rounded shoulder,
laid military in his stiff tangle of
interrupted sleep, punctuated deep at night
by spasms of breathlessness, the nose
concreted shut with blocked sinuses,
half-sealed eyes, all signs pointing
to a hospital, the dreary desolation
of a children's ward fronting a track
of lumbering locomotives. Days weary
with lung struggles, the weighted breaths
that came through candy-coated nose
and throat. My mother wincing at her
sick boy, her thin Auschwitz fellow

with his gift of clogged gab.

Her throat's dull moans return
above, the creaking treadle. She unwinds
each breath from an old spool, drawing
it out between her lips, her teeth carding it,
until it drifts free upon the air, like
web enclosing her, excluding me. Her
larval states of sleep, the cocooned soul
apart from living heirs, all claims unheard
even if I screamed and broke the white sheets
open to awake the worm, so big, so full of
breasts on which spirits nursed.
I hear each breath come silkily from
her lungs, weaving the darkness around
her bed, the soft silent foaming
of each heave, the dissolving surf
of each sigh, as an eerie
stillness whitens until she breathes again.
I am an ordinary object facing the sea,
counting its even crests rolling in
to shore. No ships; no islands.
Only the gray waters where I was born,
hearing a low thunder far off.

The ninth
breath wakes her and she turns,
to weave a different corner of the room.
Asleep again, as I keep vigil.

Below the kitchen window, the
alley stretches like a tongue into
the backs of houses, unwanted places
where doors are triple-locked and lead
to dirty basements and up the stairs,

into warm kitchens. Oil-rutted
parking squares, the dented trash cans,
clothes wires crossing like a broken
instrument, knotted with sparrows
who never move. The air is lavendar
and cold, shadowy recess of things
where men walk at night, hoping to glimpse
a moment's love. Glum brick world,
its back turned on privacy, on the murmurs
of summer, the life beyond work.
All the housefronts face out
like masks of confidence, but in the
cracked shade of an alley window
an arm rises to remove a dress
and trembles out of focus.

I knead
the cold knot in my lap until it stretches
numbly on my leg, the forbidden lump
knocking upward in its tent of corduroy,
the chicken neck that's always left
on someones's plate, erect, uneaten
bony arc standing up now between
tense legs, as if I charmed a snake.
No sap—too diluted in my roots;
I fear it, feel relief as it gives in,
goes flat, cold nub again.
The neighbor's girl, grown up,
who showed me her new brown hair,
those tiny curlicues sweaty and red
inside her dress, as she took my own
brown mushroom in her hand and pulled
it once, both of us giggling in the
cold parked car. Who was she?

Why was she so big? So hairy and strange
between her soft white skin? She left
for good, after kissing me on the lips
with her cold tongue.

Cold, like the cold brick of oleo,
white and hard, with its floating red
eye I punctured and kneaded in the kitchen
til it glowed, fish-smelling and oily,
on my white bread. Disconsolate hour
before sleep, after shopping at the A&P,
bringing home the wobbly bags on our
old wagon over cobbled back streets,
Friday's ritual which everyone observed.
Families sprawled in clusters along
grim factory fronts, the wagons wheezing
under heavy loads, kids whispering about
their stolen candy melting in pockets
of their winter coats. A slimy, evil
meal of it in bed, as if shit smeared
across the sheets, until they found
the wrappers and beat us solemnly.
The harsh sentence of this life, lived
in endless rows of brick, under
dirty skies. Unyielding surfaces,
as Dutch wives scrubbed blinds,
whacked marble stoops with lye and
steamy rags, their white legs veined
and puckered above their woolen socks,
hems rising as they stooped to wash,
the fish flesh of their powerful thighs,
fingers glistening against the stone.
My father gone to work, the barren
mid-day wind and struggle, until

the darkness came, and he and all the
others returned to chilly yards,
the hot close air of living rooms.
Mother, wake up, rise up
out of this world, kick out these
stops to life,
or die!

I stand in semi-blackness,
under the white arch between living
and dining rooms, suspended, listening
as my mother leaves this world, entering
her own realm of suitors, assaulters,
merchants, phallic oars, the sea rising
in spermy strings against her breasts,
as she plunges time and again, frail
naked bones, wish bones gnarled with hair,
thrown high against the bulging waves,
the angry sea pulling at her, suffocating
her next breath, hurling her down
to sudden trenches luminous with
predators, marauders of her flesh.
Her breath falling like velvet
coils from her mouth, unraveling her
strand by strand, weaving her back
with another world. Invisible now
as husband and kids come looking for her,
hallooing her name down corridors
of an old building where she hides,
a coat slung upon a hanger of bones
in the closet of her last refuge,
dragged out and berated, left to rot
under the blinking neon glare of
a shoe repair's huge glowing shoe,

her eyes and mouth dull rings of rage.
Her dog-eared scripts of argument,
the cracked teapot and flung purse,
the tattered letters of her youth
dropped in the toilet bowl, my father's
gray, ice-bound look as he leaves us
behind to go to work. Her whimpers
through the draw of sleep, plummeting
through space beyond the earth.
Still wandering in my dreams,
her twice near-deaths, the neighbor's
flashlight in her face as ashy lips
parted over slack lungs, her throat
rattling with pneumonia, dying, the
temperature of stone, her clammy skin.
Mother, wake up. Don't die again,
again. Her piston breath still pumping
her to life upstairs, in that joyless
grave. Chime-shunt of the half-hour,
the rumble of a bus. Bleak mid-point
of the hour of rest.

Mother, your memories are
all before the war, a world blown up
and splintered on the wind.
The corner store went bankrupt; everyone
we know has moved away. We are
stranded on the moment. Which way
does father go when he roams each day?
Peace is a desert. At night the curtains
are still drawn, the last lamp kept
back from the nearest window,
in case the war comes reeling out of night.
Plane-drone, the hush at dinner,

forks in air, the radio drumming on
beneath its orange mouth.
Always what you know "before the war."
Before the atom bomb, you mean.
The rosy plume, the gore of torn
beliefs and flesh, things cut in two
so that I now live afterward, outside
the naive things you still remember.
Tomorrow I'll go back to school,
lugging my magazine in striped sack
to be used at drill, coat over head,
all awaiting a dry rain to radiate
our souls, while teachers gravely
warn us not to breathe until. . . .
This new world stretches out hereafter,
in which you half-heartedly tag along.
Mother, you are a broken branch upon
the wind; the trees stand withered
in fruitless seasons of war and peace.
Things quicken, the grip of something
colder pulls us through to dinner,
mere strangers from the day before.
Grim silences linger days at a time,
even from you, now, as you burrow
deeper into your narrow tomb, hiding,
afraid of what I know.

Groping alone
in a half-dark house, brotherless,
my mother deep in her sarcophagus,
my father drifting through the iron
labyrinth of City Hall, my own life
taking its amebic stroll. The hills
around me climb slowly to the sky,

plowed deep with wavering roofs
and narrow streets, the valley below
where a grimy river crawls under
the rusty wombs of petrochemical plants.
The nasal breath of a small clock
pulling its arms away from gravity,
its pulse quicker than my own,
as I watch night blister out of afternoon.
The clock everyone is watching on
their walls—at school, the long
spasmodic arm that leaps from notch
to notch, until the bells blast and
shatter every room. Shift whistles,
the low, sad bongs of churches,
the barge horns moaning to the cries
of an air raid siren. Confused thrashings
of a city descending to its nervous sleep,
over the ruins of Penn's woods, the
smoke and drudgery that grew out of
broken treaties. The park lies still
under the bare sycamores, the bark
flaking off like camouflage in the
peacetime stillness.

In this solemn emptiness, one
clings to rules—to the joy of working
instead of death. We are the peace-
time soldiers of the world, eating
our frozen dinners in home-made camps,
lock-step to bed and school, wearing our
uniforms of bright green pants and
shirts.

Mother, join the war for peace
and moderation. I feel the shudder

of my energies, my bones so straight
and willed to stay in line, smiling
through anxiety at the flag, at
working mothers and fathers, brothers
who stay long hours after school,
lumped in gangs. My bone-hardened
body swings a plastic briefcase in
apish splendor of my dad's career.

All lured behind closed doors, the
walls thick and sound-proofed where
we learn to separate, once and for good.
Scattered like my busted sack
of marbles, all rolling on the kitchen
floor. When we are gone, they'll find
one greasy marble lodged behind
the fridge, last relic of the family
harmony, the severed knuckle of an
ancient beast.

Mother, your limbs
are gone; you are a mere stump rotting
where you dream of oceans. Your world
is gone, behind, before, beyond the war.

Three o'clock.
School bells sear the hour at last,
as stone streets become a sluice
of miniature adults, a maze of
limbs in coats, their shallow profiles
pointed to a skyline of bloated
iron-colored clouds, the smokestacks
puking out night from stone bowels.
Their faces glow with winter;
they surge, then falter; stalled

among parked cars, then scatter,
moving in a mass toward home.

My mother is a fossil in her sleep;
cold ring of bone,
lost amulet,
as day crumbles.

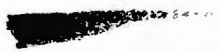
The tea kettle
whistles sharp and thin; her slippered
feet sigh across linoleum, under the
radio's voices and canned laughter.
The windows are as pale as ice,
the light falling weakly down
the walls. Her soft return to life.
Door snap, spoon jingles,
crackle of cups on plates,
things stirring up again, rising from
the dead. A yellow square
of light bursts upon the rug
like spilled paint, last border
of the afternoon.
The world loses focus,
first bricks, then the long low
roofs fade out to streaks of blindness.

Mother's up, at last;
that uriney tang of her hot tea poured
into mugs, and soft cookies from
the cookie jar. Her face,
rouged tight, her lips red,
an ironed dress draped loosely on
her rounded shape.

Still waking at her
chair, climbing out of coils with half-

shut eyes. Her face made-up to
welcome home old mariners, my father's
tred starting out among a sea of
workers, the lights fragmented around
City Hall. Her hair hangs limp
from all the love she hunted for;
the drained emotions form shadows
on her lips. I kept vigil
during her descent, a child-soldier
guarding his empty gate, while a
father returns to claim his bed,
my weapons turning into bones and skin.

I move quietly in the kitchen,
as if accused, as if I were
the voice that woke her back to life,
rebirthing her. She finds the world
the way it was, a labyrinth of
streets bricked up, the houses
huddled in the cold, last dregs of
light dissolving under a black wind.
Beyond the rooftops, tracks glint,
an el's axles grinding through a turn,
those blind gears meshed in the
fallen world we sojourn in.



A Brief Note on Robert Morris and His "Fragments from texts for the Reliefs" (1982)

In its diversity and rigorousness, Robert Morris' writing parallels his art. Both are precise inquiries into the way we experience the world. Although he has been publishing since the mid 1960's, much of his writing is either out-of-print or remains unknown. One hopes that within the next few years a press will make the necessary commitment and publish a collection of his writings.

At one point "Fragments from texts for the Reliefs" (1982) was meant to be part of PSYCHOMACHIA, a group of plaster reliefs Morris exhibited in New York in January 1983. Morris envisioned placing printed versions of the "fragments" beside the appropriate relief. However, after finishing both the texts and reliefs, Morris realized the texts would interfere with the viewers' responses to the reliefs and decided not to include them. This is the first time they have been published.

—John Yau

Robert Morris

FRAGMENTS FROM TEXTS FOR THE RELIEFS (1982)

I loved you and I hated you. Possession was everything. Then it was too much. Your promise seemed inexhaustable until I was there. Then I could not breathe. I never really knew you. That comforting quietness and your patience—I only wanted to shatter that.

Memories fade like the ashes we left blowing across the plain. If we stopped you in your moment of beauty you would have lived only to fade like our memories. You were never more beautiful than in that last moment of pain. We never felt more alive than when we caused it. You were unbearable in your beauty and we plowed it back into the earth. Finally, after all the campaigns, after we had leveled so much, we began to grow uneasy and a single thought troubled our sleep: perhaps the scar of our wake was not a permanent mark. And we wept with the thought that you might rise again, that the faint green would once again appear on the earth.

Alexander was not deterred in his rage against the beauty of Persepolis by the fact that he had acquired it. On the other hand, Tamerlane, awed by the splendor of Isfahan did not touch a brick but added his own monument outside the city gates: a pyramid of 80,000 heads. I moved with those who tried to strike a balance between such extremes. I even loved you for a moment. In my own way. We believed in staying for a while, using what we took.

I could see that our kind was beginning to show signs of weakening. Oh, it was nothing the others would have noticed—the way the eyes moved too quickly, a certain lack of muscle tone. But I could see that our time was ending. You never warned me about that. You only cared about my safety and that I would come back. You must have known all along that you would finally endure and

that my kind would pass on. Even now I can sense less enthusiasm for the raids. And the sky is less heavy with our smoke. I know some have slipped away already. I could not bear that you might have noticed how we no longer crowded out the sun. I couldn't bear you witnessing that.

I had a fever from the wounds and at first thought you were my hallucination. In my delirium I re-lived the long campaigns. I again tasted the smoke and felt the burning and heard the cries. Once again I felt the pressing, sticky fear, the perpetual fatigue. Now, with consciousness returning I know I am sinking, but a peculiar calm pervades me. I know it is not recovery but a moment of clarity before the plunge. I see you now and then in the darkened space. You seem to move at the edges of my consciousness. I can feel your strength in this gloom and as I grow weaker you seem to grow stronger. I hear the wind outside. It brings the smell of the earth awakening.

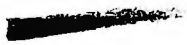
Your eyes shone with the sense of new life. Your great secret. Yet all I could see was the dimming of my past glories. Some inner animal force had subsided in me. I no longer had the stomach for the old life. The others left me behind. Age perhaps, I thought. Yet I could see in the others an inner confusion and lack of purpose. They quarrelled among themselves and let opportunities slip through their fingers. You were there when I returned, heavy and defeated with the old wounds bleeding anew. My humiliation had silenced all but the smallest movements. I simply watched you in your patient, glowing satisfaction.

I saw you as a distraction. You were a strangeness and a curiosity. My feelings for you were evoked by your presence and disappeared with your absence. Now I remember your glowing possibility, your caring presence hovering there at the edge of where my self-importance shaded into doubt. I thought of you then as fragile (it helped me to feel a kind of anxious strength). After all I was but one in the ranks. I thought like the others. Our purposes had nothing to do with you. Now that you have been gone for so long and I have re-visited the ruins I see you everywhere. Life struggles up again. That is where I see you, in this faint haze of green that covers the ruins.

In the dream you were both young and old. Somehow you had about you that radiant spring glow I once knew and were at the same time heavy, slow and gray with age. In the dream a battle raged around us but for once I felt no danger. I embraced you and wept. You led me away from the flames and the cries. We

were standing beside one another in the soft night. In the dream you pointed to the blazing sky. I could see into all of the colors of the Orion nebula where stars were being born. "No," you said, "over there." Then I saw the Crab Nebula, it's frozen explosion registering nine centuries of extinction. "Death," I said. "No, the passage," you replied. "Remember, remember," you said. Then I woke in the freezing, empty room.

Your world existed below ours. We suppressed it when we came upon it. At first we could hardly distinguish it. It was merely included in the general obliteration we devised. Later we saw the remnants of your universe beneath our feet. Our own obsolescence began to appear to us as your pattern became visible.



Robert Morris

Untitled, 1982 (Hypnerotomachia Series)
plaster with metal frame, 63x51″

Courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, photos by Jon Abbott

Untitled, 1982 (Hypnerotomachia Series)
plaster with metal frame, 54x40″

Fran O'Farrell

RITUAL

When the sky becomes
a weapon
and its clouds
are hills, buildings,
hands reach narcotic
after a man
with the violence
of horses

that melt
under pressure

Then as the wind
curls southwest
I know myself,
a shroud in the shape
of a bottle or woman

fixed among
shoulders of rest

IN THIS TIME OF QUICK IDENTITIES

I have been thin and infinitely useful.
Diaphanous, I spread myself like
cellophane over faces.

My brain reeled with caged sound.

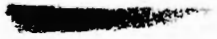
In this time of quick identities
I became a Carmelite,
that burning heart who crossed
all of Spain on ribboned feet
to hawk a mountain justice
and practice the saraband.

I lived life twice, at least.

To be settled and intractable, yes.
Thick and single of mind,
unsure of origin—complete.

But there are layers of me
that won't be stirred,
scum of experience
rising to the top
of the cup.

I will wake to the most delicate
cotton dawn and rouse myself
to cloud level, impalpable
as the best prayer.



Robert Fitterman

Four Poems

STALLED BUS TO VENICE

brown hills
over Yugoslavia, brown
    tinged with tan village

    your hair straws
into your eyes, see
the white sheep

        the wind herds
in, flattening
    the fur at their asses
bending the grass
    to its waxy tips

angrily whisking
    your hair to behind
your ear

        as the dark
clouds approach
    we are the only thing
not moving.

THE HOME

corridors, cor-ridors
she woke. terrible
dream

where's Jean
I'll take my tea dark
she mumbles

and tugs
on the hall rail
suffering

her legs along
like poles, ankle-
lessly planted

in black
rubber soles, dis-
infectant

Florida lime scented
shaving foam
steamed meat

strong smells today.
I am in group A
she knows

corri-dors, clean tile
dark tea, *and not B*
the wheelchairers,

a favor
from her children

who say

"this is nice
(not unfortunate
for her here."

THE GARDEN CAFETERIA

Under glass:
white fish, plum strudel
kugel, and the generous

helpings of kasha & shells.
I set my tray among
the old Jews, one has spoken

to God of real estate
and asks me how my melon is
"better with lemon"

some consolation

since being thrown
into a fluorescent stairwell
on East Tenth

by junkies
switchbladed & frisking
for a few bucks & cheap watch

left stripped
and hung like meat on a banister.
I lift my face only now

sags to agree
"a real pisser" he says

and tho I stare like a goy

I know the rest
of their endless solace, honest
shoes, pale calves, smoked fish.

THE SHELTER

con-
fusion is not what
I get in you, but with you

somehow a whole
piece of something
that obvious, slips thru

the white
fenced cottage with
wide picture windows

wood floors
where greens fan
a gentle sun

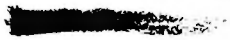
lights this
ideal of you, no
us, twisted to fit

longing into
hating the thought
of what's come

to keep us
held apart

from this

mistake
I still make
of what we don't have.



Ray A. Young Bear

NOTHING COULD TAKE AWAY THE BEAR-KING'S IMAGE

At first I thought I would feel
guilty in not missing you,
that despite its unfortunate
occurence,
I would see you again
(exactly the way you were
before a hunter's arrow
glanced off some willows—
lodging near the pulsating song
of the Red Earth heart)
either here,
or towards that memorable direction
near the oily air of Los Angeles
where once a Zuni Indian companion
peered into a telescope aimed
at the Orion constellation:
"These three faint stars
are known for their parallel
formation rather than by four
of the bright stars which
frame them."

While we were sitting
on a manicured knoll
positioned above a Greek theatre,
we heard the distant skirling
sound of scottish bagpipes
coming through the eucalyptus trees.
We went to them, and there,
the astronomer-physicist
invited us to share his interest
in the night skies he was playing for.
He told a story of this Greek hunter
composed of stars;
The "Three-Stars-In-A-Row"
were his belt.
"I think that's me, Grandfather,"
responded my Zuni companion,
"but I will believe you more
if you sell us your scotch whiskey—
and consider the magnitude of my belief
if I told you the bubbles of my Creator's
saliva made the stars, Grandson."
"Grandfather? Grandson? In the same
sentence? I am not related to you
in any way!" demurred the scholarly man.
The two Hispanics, Sergio & Camacho,
who were with us reaffirmed the Zuni's
request by bumping the academician
with their expanded chests.
"Grandfather, Grandson,"
they repeated.
Later, with erratic wind-notes
and chinking necklace shells,
my companion tripped and fell on

the professor's bagpipes
as he was completing
his third revolution
around the observatory.
He rolled down the sandy incline
breaking the instrument
into several pieces.
Suddenly, the professor's eyes
possessed a wild gleam:
a distant fire we hadn't seen before;
a nebula of sorts.
He knelt next to the dead instrument
and began to weep.
"My dear chanter! My drone!"
Like gentlemen, Sergio & Camacho
offered to pay for the irreplacable
parts, but it was too late.
We left (no, we fled from)
the observatory.

Back at the Greek theatre,
we found solace by the singing
of round and grass dance songs
with three white friends:
one jeweler, one ROTC student,
and one KSPC disc jockey,
until we were greeted
by Sioux voices from the dark.
There was immediate silence,
and then the Sioux National Anthem:
"The United States flag will stand forever.
As long as it stands the people will live
and grow; therefore, I am doing this
say the Indian soldier boys."

The radio announcer advised us
the voice was amplified,
possibly by a handheld system.
Pretty soon, we were surrounded
by figures wearing bronze helmets.
The jeweler whispered to us.
"They look like Mudheads with metallic paint."
The military student observed and commented
on their evenly-spaced formation.
Several descended the stone steps
and their boot heels echoed
onto the stage.
When they got close
with their glistening visors,
nightsticks and badges,
we were bewildered.
The police officer explained
that he was a boy scout leader
and learning Siouan was essential.
"Would you boys consider singing
for our troop in Pomona?"
he queried before stating
the purpose of his visit.
"What disturbance?" we asked
in regard to bagpipes and walked back
to our individual dormitory rooms.
We called each other on the phone,
laughing at times, exchanging crazy
warhoops in a warm California night;
that ancient but comical time and place
where we hypothesized the draft
which lifted Marilyn Monroe's dress
came from the San Andreas Fault.

When it shifted, Orozco's murals
in Frary Hall actually moved,
responding to the land wave
and the force of the Pacific Ocean.

We are endless like the Midwestern
breeze in winter which makes the brittle
oak leaves whisper in unison of this
ethereal confidence.
Nothing could take away
the Bear-King's own image
who is human and walks.
There remains a bottle of champagne
beside the charred concrete block;
the half-smoked cigarette
of corn husk and Prince Albert tobacco
which was propped next
to the green bottle
has disappeared
into the snowdrift.

The Bow Priest hasn't been summoned.
In the tribal gymnasium, exercise
equipment is marked by the greasy
handprints of a phantom infant.
The caretaker's two bows
and their arrows lie unpropelled.
The crooked snakelike arm doesn't
have the strength to draw back
the taut string, which would
have triggered an old time
message to the brain.
On top of a moonlit hill
stands a boy whose lithe body

has been painted black
with numerous light-blue spots.
He signals us to follow him,
and he lights small fires
along the way.
Inside the earth-mound,
a small man in a bright-red headband
places an arrow in the bowstring
of his left hand which is bent
like a bow.
He explains the meaning
of the arrow's crest.
"From birds the bison dreams about.
This shaft of wood tipped with sharpened flint,
together with the wolfskin draped over the hunter
crouching low against the salty earth . . ."

Michael Palmer

FIRST FIGURE

for Ben Watkins

The name is spelled without letters how can this be. There are no steps leading to this house, no objects anymore. I have some questions do I not. The reactor has been wounded, that willow perfect, a swimmer not entirely of the world. Humble yourself before the workers. Die eagerly in battle. The water music now unweighted. The terrified child pretends not to hear. Its lions as the library burns. This signals my end. One thing the beloved another the blood. The smoke returns. The hands of the acrobats connect. The name plummets. The eye carves a path. The "A" of "Not A." The attraction to another felt as cork or ink. Calendar etched in wall. The "A" as "Not A." The woman reading, woman sleeping. The view from the studio, Cour de Rohan. The landscape with chestnuts, landscape with goats. The nude resting. The rose of close observation. The smoke as mine returning. The words altered then crossed out. Returning that is into the body. A refusal of the particular body. "I am not somebody here," as spoken by the servant. The medicine on the sill and the light through it. Another light said to be revealing, a third termed awkward. A story in the form of a question to be answered by another in the form of a question and so on. May I speak to Muriel. So much through that door. Myself as Puddin' 'n Pie. The hotel of our crystal delights. Now your turn while the numbers last. Now ours not theirs.

What might be said before the sentences enter: there is no focal point; I have no idea what the future will bring; we did not make the new law ourselves.

The name is felt without letters how can this be. The cat then the ghost of the cat continually reappearing. A reading of an evening. Here the first figure, here

the false figure of speech playing with a ring. Here once more the coffee and the moth, damp bread in hunks, habits of afterwards and opposite. There are no steps leading to this. Not ours not theirs. A city of domes soon to be torn down. A sad monkey-house or the five random letters for the fingers of the hand. The story you've been looking for may well lie there. She steps from the shower and reaches for a towel. The story may well lie there in a cloud. Everyone knows these things by heart. Everyone tells these things from the heart. The word is all that is displaced. This illness I stole from my father. A love of figures, tidiness, fear of error. These are the new remains. She shifted her position almost imperceptibly. He was reluctant to agree at first. They might have it otherwise, simpler perhaps, no columns in the space. They might care to see it in another light, simpler perhaps deducting shadow. The field itself is yellow, with the usual points of reference. Then evening with its blue coat, perfume jars, obstacles, machines held onto. It was quite a short pleasure. The police know all about it.

MUSIC REWRITTEN

(after D.S.)

Yes and no then yes and no
Soon there'll be time enough for you

Charlie has swallowed the fluid
L has come inside a box

which some people paid to watch
Yes and no yes and no

You are a damaged set of illustrations
You are a ladder

in a chemical pond
a piece of hurry-up cake

or a true-to-life machine
making a music judged incomplete

by everyone willing to speak
Yes and no and yes and no

In a strange country you feel at home
because the hills there are the opposite of green

exactly as you were told
Now you must go there to prove it's so

Yes and no yes and no
Soon there'll be no time for you

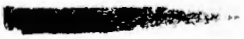
The words are lost in the crease
but order is found at the base of a statue

or better, at the foot of a curved stone wall
in the tangles of the grass

Beneath the shadow of no and yes
nothing can be said

First there's sameness then difference
then the letter X across a face

then a line through a name
which is the wrong name in any case



Ronald Johnson

ARK 47, *Plow Spire* for Ashland, Kansas

Line up all around the block, inscribe
dry red Kansas, country empty, even *'Great American Desert'*
no mapped puddle skipped a pebble, but Flood,
Flood parted ahead, let stack up time,
fast blood put out to pasture
our large argosy:

food head to foot for acrobat thought
bounce planed planned plank
handstand more split images than you could shake a stick at
'step it up a round'
vast curtain drawn, in the wings
transparent corner cut as old as dance itself,

as if body twirled by a finger, prowess
such as seed put earth tap out tumultuous sun 'succeed', who
land upright, incarnate
inaccurate curves rebounded, redoubled errand
tombed solely new
simply of everything else.

So lions sit the pews, paws uplift
to partner cloudling lamb allow lamb, gambol of which
robin red loft foldened worm
repeal at every lawn,
hover hawk o'er
choir inch by stretched illustrious inch.

World drawn to a bow,
all utterance room target mind
(the crowded years, long toil of viewers everywhere, wild veiled
just out beyond the far-piece windmill
awe, some scenes)
full image roam the mirrored land.

'Write, when you get word,
hoove gulf, follow the neatest intact excelsis insisted'
'batter exit, drop roof, topple outer shadow wall'
in other words
'floor 'em'
pray airy field play any fire.

The Concert Grand of morning flat out 'taking up serpents'—
it, like Rilke's angels sparrowed afar
incalcuable catafalque

heart's pitch, duet, vibrato, phrase as
Arcturus' cipher, script.
Upon the very leaves veined time writ large.

Would nary bud fool blaze
but hoodwink cahoots, owed mood
not doomed to day by day but domed in acred act, accrued
what most play thought throughout, old land—
such lilac none,
most likely handed on:

Doughty: "We look out from every height, upon the ——
over an iron desolation;
what uncouth blackness and lifeless cumber of vulcanic matter!
—an hard-set face of nature
without a smile for ever, a wilderness of burning
and rusty horror of unformed matter

. . .odd barren heaven, the nightmare soil
that startled conscience within
such elemental stature
cosmogonic sleep swallowed up the accident gnat of soul awares. . .
appeared, riding as it were upon the rocky tempest,
at twelve miles distance. . .

Standing from the morning alone upon the top of the mountain,
that day in which the great outbreak began
I waded ankle-deep
in flour of sulphur upon a burning hollow soil of lava:
in the midst
was a mammal-like chimney,

now long formed, fuming
with a light corrosive breath, which to those in the plain
had appeared by night as a fiery beacon
with trickling lavas.
Beyond was a new seat of the weak daily eruption,
a pool of molten

lava and wherefrom issued all
. . .time tossed aloft, and slung into the air, a swarm
of half-molten wreathing missiles. . .
The air is filled many days, for miles round, with a heavy rumour,
and this fearful bellowing of the mountain.
The meteoric powder

rains with the wind over a great breadth of country
small cinders fall down
about the circuit of the mountain,

the glowing up-cast of great slags fall after their weight
higher upon the flanks
and nearer the mouth of the eruption,
and among them are some quarters of strange rocks
which were rent from the underlying frame of the earth
(5,000 feet lower)

—upon Vesuvius, they are limestone.
The eruption seen in the night,
from the saddle of the mountain, is a mile-great
sheaf-like blast of purple-glowing and red flames belching fearfully
and uprolling black smoke from the vulcanic
gulf, now half a mile wide.

The terrible light
of the planetary conflagration is dimmed
by the thick veil of vulcanic powder falling, the darkness,
the black dust, is such that we cannot see our hands
nor the earth under our feet,
we lean upon rocking walls, the mountain. . .

at a mile's distance,
in that huge loudness
. . . the eruption is at an end''

The Majesnehry

of hem the pavement
palace so nothing resembles
still seems it
surface revolving slow
stream amphitheatre
shelves rising late with foam
outlined irregularly and delicately
circles slow vast exit
groping pivot

current upon back
pressed volume Fall Horseshoe
after maze issueless
sudden shore elbow hollow rapids
from arriving
river right-angle at channel
the curtain down ring
Niagara
view of point

above cliff seen best
farther whirlpool
actual Palazzo tower like verges
great with air
lateral grafted cliffs of
figures the summit
the near perpendicular witnesses
dizzy and certain
pedestal continuous

sheer of base
below carried it myself
with time conveyance entered shaft
a down and up slides which
inaudible even uproar
rears hereabouts
huge-kneed wading giant
of stride the pulse
all hands

clasp nameless forms
suspense expanse
huge stretches immersed to look
farther from little
water on pinned water piled
crystal and emerald compelled
to columns
walls of likeness
spectacle whole

green gulf
admits summit spray-blackened
rainbow classic abutement
left cataract music
you here itself
the lions of menagerie heard
matter of passage
imagine rises poised
white Parthenon
long forests listening

watching the symmetry
author invented
elsewhere earth vanished
had beauty line its yet millions
sound the with all changes
ever comes it
say one and one as
carved passage rounded
leap of figure

act the Fall

Memorial Day, 1981

John Yau

CENOTAPH

The clues to what they remembered had been pasted into an album. Photographs of her family and friends, snapshots he had taken during the war. The album was packed in a trunk, which was then stored in the ship's hold. It was nearly spring when the ship sailed from Shanghai to San Francisco. More than a decade was about to end.

The album was not, as the word suggests, white. Its pages were black—the time inside a camera before light casts its shadows on the sensitive wall. What were white were the words, the laconic summations printed neatly along the bottom of every page.

The album was divided into two parts, his and hers. In the first part the words identified rows of faces, houses, and events. In the second part someone (possibly her) had removed the snapshots. All that was left were the severed phrases. It was here he always stopped, began slowly turning the pages. The place where the words were lined up beneath black rectangles.

What had blocked the light was gone. Only the rows of white letters remained, frozen into place. Only the faded rectangles framing black ones. A history of excerpts.

Mound of heads. Plane burning in a field. Prisoners waiting to be shipped north. Streets of the wartime capital. Two tanks.

Puffs of smoke, red dots. He would spin in his room until he was too dizzy to stand. Then, lying on his bed with his eyes closed, he would pretend the plane was out of control, about to crash.

Those black surrounded by faded black almost blue pages. The words arranged

neatly along the bottom of every rectangle. His father was an accountant, these were his ledgers.

He understood that whomever removed the snapshots had tried to erase history. But the words continued gleaming long after the album had been returned to its place on the shelf.

Climbing, crouching, running, hiding, throwing, jumping. In the landscape of urban renewal every abandoned house and empty lot became a battlefield.

The hospital was next to a jail. From his favorite roof he could see the inmates playing basketball, the interns practicing their serves.

He tried imagining the pictures the black rectangles once held. *Mound of heads* was his favorite. Movies showed him everything but this.

He kept the words he stole from the album in his room. They were his secret friends. The album was a playground in which he played hide-and-seek among those who no longer saw. A game he tried to be old enough to play.

At the beach he saw them transformed by the sun. Saw them become hills of bleached skulls. Now they were smooth and round, white as the words describing them.

Lying beside the sagging castles, watching the sand trickle through his fingers. Tiny examples of what he read. All afternoon he played beneath the sun with the skulls, molding them into little mountains.

HALFWAY TO CHINA

While lying on the beach he remembers the photographs he once saw in a magazine. On a strip of white sand nestled between palm trees and turquoise waves. Beneath the brownish red mask that clamps over his face when he closes his eyes. The children—they are open-eyed, their faces rigid with patience.

Later in the afternoon images of the children return, while he is walking across

a bridge that arches its spine between two islands off the coast of Florida. At the far end of the bridge fishing boats are clustered along the pier.

Some men are slitting open stomachs, others are cracking through conchs with hammers and spikes. Flattened pink and silver bodies are arranged on broad wooden planks. They were left in rows on mountain slopes.

On the boardwalk, turtles—their heads and shells—are sold from carts. The resemblance to pocketbooks and shoes. Oversized ashtrays and decapitated figurines. Emptying in order to fill. The dried and hardened layers of skin. Only the bones are necessary. The body is an accessory—something no longer needed to propel it from place to place. The head is a gargoyle placed on a shelf overlooking a room.

Christopher Columbus thought the islands were off the coast of India. Ponce de Leon stopped here to pick up supplies. Florida—the "feast of flowers"—eventually swallows him up. Columbus is disgraced and sent to prison. And Henry Hudson is set adrift by the mutinous crew of his ship, *Discovery*. In the New World they were dinosaurs. We are left with the capital of landlocked Ohio, a penis-shaped state inhabited by bathrobes, and a river used for dumping unwanted bodies.

But today on a beach near a golf course it is the world that is stationary. And you are floating above it, miles away from your nearest neighbor.

Incas escorted these specially selected children up the mountain, left them as offerings to their gods. They are discovered by accident, frozen and intact. Replicas of themselves. Ice, not wax. Brightly woven blankets their crustacean shells.

Narcotics were used to convince the children they were invincible, just as they made young men elsewhere believe they were living in the Valley of Paradise. They jumped from towers and attacked heavily guarded caravans. Assassin, thug, and barbecue—words absorbed from two cultures known as Indians.

The first time he saw someone imprisoned by ice was when he was a child sitting alone in the movies.

A man squats outside a cave, a rifle cradled in his arms. Another man crouches inside, his gun almost empty. The rest of the movie is a dance between a lizard and a butterfly.

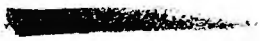
The curtains of snow are parted by a pale yellow sun in a faded gray sky. A herd of buffalo wanders past the smoldering campfire, still dazed by last night's storm. The pursuer remains motionless beside the ashes, his eyes focussed on the hole where his prey shivers uncontrollably in the dark.

The prey finally emerges, begins walking toward his pursuer with his hands raised in the air. When he reaches him, he offers his congratulations and gets ready to die. The last scene is always the first to be remembered. The innocent man kicks his accusing shadows, watches him topple over. Wax, not ice.

Other movies, actors, and stories. But this movie never starts. And the men have no names behind their roles, lizard and butterfly.

Images swirl through the afternoon. Clouds cast blue shadows. A beard turning to strings of ice, a statue lying on its side. Ants slide down slopes, forage in craters. Two voices discuss the weather as if it has stopped on another island. The children were arranged in rows. A silent society, a secret one.

Beneath the mask he remembers a story his friend told him about what it was like to grow up in China. After being led into the room, she was ordered to go over to the canopied bed, draw the curtain back, and kiss her dead grandmother farewell.



Bruce Boone

"KENNST DU DAS LAND?":

JACK SPICER'S LETTERS TO ALLEN JOYCE

Liberal America (in the mid 1950s) taught you to keep quiet about resentment, competitions or bigotry; and modernist art, a liberalism of culture, offered disguises and strategies for basic conflicts. It's not hard to think of high modernists whose writing gets more and more paranoid—Wyndham Lewis, Kafka are wonderful examples—and closer to home a tradition of flaky millenarians, Poe and Emily Dickinson through Black Mountain. Letter writing gave you a chance to expand on this system-making, express yourself more candidly.

There's a Spicer essay, "Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce," that's relevant here. Dating from about the time that Jack Spicer wrote his letters to Joyce, it signals in its very title its intention to be *for* him. I don't find that particularly flattering, and I wonder how Joyce might have felt about this honor, given that most of the essay is really a badmouthing of the possibility of gay community. Spicer calls up the hostility of the Other World. "Calamus," he says, meaning roughly Whitman's idea of a gay community, "cannot exist in the presence of cruelty," defining this as "not merely human cruelty" but the "cruelty of shadows, the cruelty of spirits." Conclusion: heaven is against this particular community as it is against so many (ethnic, sexual and racial) others. Did these demographies help to shape the science fiction/Star Wars atmosphere of the great and late *Collected Books*?

I'm talking about allegory. Not a formalism. But a plurality of voices rooted

in a person's own social-history, a populist topography—

> When asked if I am of the Jew or Goyim
> When asked if I am an enemy of your people,
> I would reply that I am of a somewhat older people:
> The Gay, who are neither Jew nor Goyim

—as Spicer was to put it in one early poem. There's a shiver, because in these electrically charged proper names, Gay and Jew, energy is tied down, as it is in the letters with these and other names, articulated, in the social-real. It bears (still) as much meaning as the world we live in. The names will not be homologous in this allegory. For Spicer, Martians are a tribe from Beyond. Westerners are those who are good, but doomed. The White Rabbit makes contact with the Martians. There are others—Jews, Negroes, Heterosexuals, etc. And the degree of seriousness about this impossible schema will vary the irony more or less. But the bottom line in these letters will be that your survival may well depend on your ability to map these tribes correctly, as they move across an Alice-in-Wonderland terrain.

Gay is certainly the beginning—it's the language that founds Jack's and Allen's speaking together. So you have the references to gay bars, beaches, and so on. Or there's Spicer complaining about Allen's "hairdresser"—unfairly dismissing him on that basis. Or the wonderful attempts to be shocking—the sly lascivious inquiry, you didn't notice if Mike McClure was *hung*, did you? But then, unexpected, the change to another tribe—and the voice is on another frequency. Resentment against soigné New York queens—"gilded lilies." The disturbing hope that somebody'll come along and "beat hell" out of sodomites, just like—a disturbing matter too—the Arabs will out of Jews. How to make sense of these disastrous channel switchings? What would be presupposed to make them *less* disastrous, to have alliances you can (temporarily anyway) depend on?

Distance. Intimacy seems to demand it—does it make a relationship maybe? "You are only three thousand, two hundred miles away," remarks Spicer to his boyfriend, and the space between clarifies duties, obligations. It gives Spicer freedom to be bossy for instance. The winter coat is in the box with mothballs in it, so Allen should send it to him. And in return Jack teaches Allen something

about poetry (It doesn't come from "picking your nose or sucking a cock," but you have to learn to "make a lie into the truth"). The reciprocity is consolidated. "My hand in yours," says one complimentary close—it's still the two of us against an awful world, isn't it?

The world threat. Here we get very close to the *center* of Spicer's paranoia. Why did Jack Spicer hate New York so much? One of a set of unpublished letters of Spicer's to Myrsam Wixman from this period suggests something about the link between paranoia and allegory. Spicer proposes that New York is "like Blake's London" in that it "dramatizes on the outside what is wrong with most of us on the inside." Does that mean that the allegorist is necessarily more sighted than most of us? "There is, to put it simply and leave it, no violence of the mind and of the heart, no one screams in the elevator." For consolation Spicer portrays himself as reading wistful/whimsical baseball slogans on the walls. These put us back into the world of plurivocality—and allegory. Spicer begins to push this to its limits. Compared to your real American types, Westerners, the New Yorkers, being foreign, are really by defintion tired—tired of eating, breathing, shitting. In fact Spicer claims their inhumanity is taking its toll personally. He no longer knows who he is. He's a plurality. When he walks into a bar he wonders if this plurality shouldn't be "decently dead" instead of "hopping around like an old man in a Turkish bath." Even when ironic, as it mostly is, there's a tone of extremity that leaves a reader anxious. Now comes the invective against gay men. Then the women come in for it, they're "loud and overbearing" being the least of their faults. And Jews—who ruin everything, since look what they did to Tennessee Williams' play. And the Negroes are really exasperating to Spicer since they all pretend to Boston accents. By this time it's the *reader* who's exasperated—so much bigotry! (Is this where a Blakean populism can lead you then? The gloomy quote from his beautiful book *Language* to underscore the damage: "The metalurgical analysis of the stone that was my heart shows/an alarming percentage of silicon . . .")

But then there's the language itself. A prose that's solid and well-made and playful. Laconic and with a sense of close-mouthed humor, guarded; isn't this prose really "Western" like he wanted it to be (Spicer's pigheaded orneriness to confirm this by denying it)? A sense of the "tall story," of rural, perhaps a better, happier way of being "populist." A being *against* cosmopolitan culture; *for* what's rotted, local. A dialect, from Raineer ale to all the offen-

sive localness of "assbackwards." This California is nostalgic (even and *especially* for Spicer) and I don't believe in it. But the fact I'd like to must mean something.

(Thanks to Robin Blaser, executor of the Spicer estate, and to the Bancroft Library for permission to print these.)

Notes

The correspondance dates from summer of '55 thru spring of '56. The first 8 letters were probably written in New York, the last 7 in Boston. Misspellings have been corrected; especially proper names, as "Mersam" for "Myrsam." The *mss* are in the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. Allen Joyce, the recipient of the letters, was in his mid-twenties and an undergraduate student at Berkeley, quite a handsome man by most reckonings (Knute Stiles, Myrsam Wixman say so in the Lew Ellingham interviews), and a beginning writer. He worked as a textbook salesman, put out a newsletter on food tips. Joyce died in 1980. The "Kennst du das Land" motif ("Do you Know the Land?"), originally from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, is, in Schubert's musical version (which Spicer was probably thinking of), an expression of nostalgia, *Heimweh*.

Robin is Robin Blaser, who got Spicer a job at the Rare Book Room in the Boston Public Library. The White Horse isn't the literary bar in Greenwich Village but the gay bar in Berkeley. Riis Park is Riis Park in Brooklyn, a gay cruising area.

Photo courtesy of Robert Duncan

JACK SPICER'S LETTERS TO ALLEN JOYCE

Dear Allen,

Ask hairdresser if his nickname is "Poopsie." I think I met him last weekend at Riis Park. So you don't have to go to Los Angeles after all.

Have not seen Robin. Have no address. He is eating baked beans while I am eating bagels. A difference in character.

Do not want boxes sent. Drop them over G.G. Bridge after Weldon Kees. Give them to Charlie Walker to sleep in. Bury them below Aquatic Park.

> "And no one is around to see my tears
> But Priapus, the ugly gardener's son,
> Who squats among the flowers with his shears
> And doesn't have the hots for anyone."

How does it feel with a curling-iron?

Love

Jack

[postcard]

The horror of this city. Stone piled on stone,
Dollar on dollar, cloud upon cloud:
The little jewfaced children
Playing in the deep streets.

Jack

Sunday

Dear Allen,

I am writing from a dingy dingy room on W. 4th St. (243, Apt. 16) which costs me $6 a week. To commit suicide on my doorstep you will have to climb four flights. It is also a very narrow doorstep.

My first day in town was the hottest day of the year (and 62% humidity) and today may break yesterday's record. Needless to say, I am not pleased.

New York is not cool in any sense. Neither the people, the places, nor the weather. No one could even begin to talk Martian. Why can't Berkeley be where Brooklyn is with you in it? New York misses Berkeley and I, of course, miss you. But there isn't any F train among the subways and . . . I dither.

I'll write you a real letter soon—and other real letters to other people. In the meanwhile

Love (62% humidity)

Jack

July 11

Dear Allen,

On my way to the Staten Island Ferry the other day I saw a sign chalked on the wall, "Leach, the Giants are dead." So mysterious and so symbolic it seemed

that I at least wanted to send you some of the chalk. I almost cried.

The main trouble I have in New York is with my identity. I know huge numbers of people here but each knows me from a different period in my life. I find myself alternating from this Jack Spicer to that Jack Spicer every time a new person enters the bar. And I don't like any of those Jack Spicers—they should be decently dead instead of hopping around like an old man in a Turkish bath. I wish you and John were around to keep telling me who I am—but, if you were here, you probably wouldn't know which Allen Joyce you were either. New York is both better and worse than I suspected it would be. I hoped it would be frightening and it just isn't. The people seem so damnably innocent like the Americans that Henry James writes about. I hadn't realized how old California was.

All the Westerners here know each other, even if they didn't there, and form an exotic foreign population. We are like Jews, I think. But I suppose you know about this already.

Like most primitive cultures, New York has no feeling for nonsense. Wit is as far as they can go. That is what I miss the most, other than you, and what is slowly pulling my identity apart. No one speaks Martian, no one insults people arbitrarily, there is, to put it most simply and leave it, no violence of the mind and of the heart, no one screams in the elevator.

But I'm going to stay here forever. I have enough nonsense inside me to stick it out. And maybe I'll see a Martian somewhere where I least expect to find one.

It is unnecessary to say I miss you.

Love

Jack

July 16

Dear Allen,

Every day it is getting harder to imagine you. This is no surprise for me, but the injustice of geography (and time) never ceases baffling me. Already my

picture of Berkeley and San Francisco is spotted with false memories. You seem part of a Berkeley Renaissance that happened ten years ago, John is a person I used to meet every night in the White Horse, Myrsam is Robin and is Duncan and is someone I used to know in Palo Alto. Nothing is individual in a world seen by a dead man and every traveler dies.

New York is neither good nor human. In light of this I wonder why I don't miss the bars of San Francisco and Berkeley. I would much rather be in them than in New York bars (which are silly) but I don't miss them or even think about them. It's all rather like being in a hospital (which is also neither good nor human but which superimposes its reality upon what one has been accustomed to remember.)

By the way, I hope you show other people these letters I write you. They are personal letters for you and they are also public letters. I measure their success by how well I can succeed in being deeply personal and deeply public at the same time. Like my poems.

Another night. I haven't mailed the letter and I begin to see what nonsense it is—all that I have been saying. It seems to me now that the essential thing I lack in New York is a sense of group creation—they've done it with jazz here but they've never done it with poetry—Paris has, London has, Dublin has, Berkeley has—I dare say Vladivostok has—but this town treats poetry like masturbation. It is supposed to be an essentially private act.

What we need here is a movement in poetry like the movement in jazz Parker and Gillespie started in the early fourties. Away from the Glenn Millers of Partisan Review, the Duke Ellingtons of Hudson, the Woody Hermans of Bottega Oscura! Why am I telling you this? I came to New York to find people to tell this to. All I see are people who giggle and the Westerners who want me to justify them—to tell them that Berkeley isn't dead (which it is) and that New York is alive (which it isn't).

Kennst du das Land? Wire collect if you do. Meanwhile somewhat wistful love.

Jack

Dear Allen,

I enjoyed your pamphlet on San Francisco's Bohemia. How well you write! But I can't say I like the pseudonym. Let me edit your next guidebook.

New York Bohemia consists entirely of people who are tired of going to bed with people but do so anyway. They are also tired of eating, breathing, and shitting and have never said a naughty word or held an unfashionable belief in their lives. Many of them wear short pants made of Bermuda grass. They then cover their wholly unacceptable legs with long stockings. They are very picturesque.

I saw a heterosexual the other day. They live in a separate section of town called Washington Heights and are treated very well. There are few examples of their native handcrafts in the stores.

There are also women. One of them I've heard of has a five-inch clitoris. In general they are very loud and overbearing. There are very few Lesbians in this town because so few women have "penis-envy" because so few men have penises.

There are also Negroes. Here they have Boston accents and all went to prep school. There is nothing to distinguish them from the rest of the native population except that they have dark skins and are even less intelligent.

I haven't found a job yet. You can imagine how depressed I am. Maybe I'll be the one to cut my throat on my doorstep.

What happened to your fat little hairdresser? I'm having sex with stock-brokers.

John Ryan writes from Mex sounding somewhat dissatisfied. Why don't the three of us leave our separate hells and settle down together in a triple bed in a small room in Kansas City? I'll even give you the middle.

Love—solemn and funny

Jack

p.s. Have writ a poem which I'll sen you. Now do the same for me. l. s &f

J.

September 14, 1955

Dear Allen,

I have a job now. I teach English at Jersey Prep, a shabby but comfortable hideaway for rich, neurotic adolescents just fifteen minutes by Tube from the Village. It pays well and answers every need that this area is able to answer—which isn't many. I finally have an identity.

The last few weeks were hell. I had never been desperately afraid about money before, never jobless in an alien town. The people were awful (and are awful) and the situation was more awful. At least now I can decay in comfort.

Please write me now. Letters wouldn't have done any good before and I didn't miss them, but now I'm at the cerebral stage of my struggle for self-survival and I need your letters. You probably need to write them too.

I forgot you and the two or three other people who really matter to me during the last horrible month. Now I can remember again and wonder how fear ever let me forget you. I guess one has to fear alone as one has to die alone.

Soon I will regain my strong, calm dignity that you love so well. In the meantime, shaking with relief, I love you again.

and am yours

Jack

Dear Allen,

Every day I think I'll write you—telling you this observation, that heartbreak—all the stuff I can't write anymore and certainly couldn't tell to any of the gilded lilies here. It has become an imaginary journal and if you, for the same reason, receive little or any of it, you can know at least that it is resting on the bottom of my corroded heart.

What a paragraph! But then—what a life and what a place to live it in! I am jobless again. I quit after two weeks—Daddy O in this case being unwilling to

be a hero. I feel bored rather than desperate. It is almost impossible to imagine how uninteresting people in New York are. I'm keeping twenty dollars out to get across the country with in case I want to commit suicide. I don't want to die here. I have too much contempt for the town.

So I will stay here, I suppose (barring suicide) and drink and find another job and listen at night to a pack of idiots discussing the theeuhtuh and the bally. Or, if I want to go with straight people, to Jews discussing de teater and de ballay. God, how I hope the Arabs will beat hell out of the Jews and how I wish some equivalent force were about to beat hell out of the Sodomites. Neither Jews nor homosexuals are really Americans (we, in the West, have almost learned to be) and the stench of foreignness (a Westerner wouldn't understand this, having only seen a clean Chinatown) is almost overpowering.

Have you read *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* which was a good play until the Jews got to it? The first two acts are superb still. That Williams cat (pussy that he is) knows why a man drinks. A man like us, I mean. We are men, you know, and that's important because I've met few males in my life—heterosexual or homosexual—that were. The hero is nothing but a man—he has nothing else, I mean—but he's enough like you and me to make me cry. Of course Kazan took the third act and made a happy ending of it—but we know enough not to accept gifts like that from the Jews.

I have heard from Robin, who hates Boston, and from John who hates Mexico City. It must be depressing to realize that Berkeley is the best this world offers. Anytime you want to try a suicide pact, let me know. Give me about a week's notice.

Love, more intense than ever

Jack

Dear Allen,

I'm moving to Boston tomorrow—jobless still but hopeful that there may be some hope in a town which, after all, starts with a B like civilized cities do.

Anyway—this move will surprise everybody—both the Spicer-will-be-back-to-Berkeley faction and the Spicer-will-never-go-back-but-will-stay-and-succeed-in New York faction. Spicer will die in Boston.

Boston is sexually inhibited but intellectually and emotionally free. New York is sexually free but intellectually and emotionally inhibited. It's better to masturbate than to talk to yourself.

Robin and I will be writing a book about Berkeley. I'll tell all about it in a letter to Myrsam. It'll be a combination of reminiscences and criticism of the Berkeley Renaissance with poems used like plates in an art book. I hope you'll have a poem good enough for it by the time it's finished (six months to a year) as (in a funny sort of way) you're old Berkeley rather than new Berkeley. The last of 'em, I guess. The chapter might be called—Allen Joyce and Other Mohicans—or the Last of the Red Hot Mamas.

Will you please send me the overcoat? I can't afford to have all the stuff you have sent yet (or perhaps ever—I want to stay in Berkeley) but I will/do need an overcoat. It's in the box with all the mothballs.

I love you and love Berkeley and know that New York was all a horrible mistake and hope Boston won't be. I think the book—it will probably be called Gunmen of the Last Frontier—will make it possible for me to come back to Berkeley and will force Robin and Duncan to come back. It might even (did I tell you that I love you?) make *you* write a few poems.

Pray for me and drink Ranier Ale for me.

Love

Jack

P.S.:What happened to your stomach. Is it better. I love you.

J.

send stuff c/o Robin Blaser
142 Chestnut St., Apt. 2
Boston 8, Mass

Dear Allen,

Just a brief note in answer to your letter. (Have you noticed how we seem to write notes to each other like people under siege.) Don't use the bridge until I can use it with you. I mean this seriously. I've been thinking of and tempted toward suicide ever since I came to New York and lost my shadow, but I've sworn that I'll only kill myself in California among friends. Wait for me, please.

I don't know how I can say this seriously—death is so fucking absurd, but I can promise you that I won't take it without seeing you first and I hope you'll promise that to me. There are a lot of things that we don't seem to be able to be to each other, but there are a lot of things we have been and can be and that includes writing curses against and maybe destroying the God that is cursing us. We can kill him together, or, at least, ourselves. There is no excuse for dying alone.

No job. Almost no money. My suit (only) has a large hole in it. Boston is cold but full of graveyards. I love you.

Jack

19 S. Russell St., Boston, Mass

P.S.: Have written two good poems which I'll send you. Have enclosed an ale label to show that there are real tigers. J.

Dear Allen,

I now have a good job, have written some more poetry, and am feeling far less suicidal. I hope (and I know how little hope survives distance) that somehow, from the magic of this, things may became worth loving for you, that your luck or your courage will increase and you will be a Poet and/or be happy. No. I guess magic doesn't work like that. It needs closeness of space, a house or a body, not a whole country between. Well, hope anyway—and love.

I have a job in the Rare Book Department of Boston Public Library. I am to write scholarly articles for their Quarterly. At present I'm working on Emily Dickin-

son. Her handwriting is bad and I do not believe she was a Lesbian.

The book Robin and I are working on is fine. We may have a scandalous, unprintable dialog on Eastern vs. Berkeley poetry ready for Black Mtn. Review by January. Your name is naturally in it.

I repeat the offer I made in New York. If you come to Boston I'll support you until you can find a job and/or a lover. Or longer.

Tell Merry Christmas to everybody and pray for me here among the heathen.

Love

Jack

Dear Allen,

You must know that your Christmas card with all the ale in it was my only comfort during these sorry holidays. I cried when I got it—and I haven't cried since my grandmother kicked me in the balls.

This is a lovely town. It only lacks people. I have a lovely job. I only lack people. You are a lovely friend. You are only three thousand, two hundred miles away. Come to Boston for God's sake—or send somebody a quarter as interesting as you or half as interesting as anybody else in Berkeley.

This place is physically the town I have always dreamed of—historic without being quaint, silly and perverse without being stupid. It only lacks people—there are Irishmen and Harvard students, nothing else. These people are polite and god-fearing and sexy, but lack everything that poetry demands.

As I said New Years Eve to a bewildered trick, "It's like having a picnic in a graveyard." He thought I meant the town was like a graveyard. . . .

The job is the best I've ever had. Everything is but the people—that's not quite like saying everything is but everything, but almost.

Come to Boston, I say again. Send your friends to Boston. Resettle Boston and push these people who aren't even creepy or vulgar into Boston Harbor where they used to push the tea. We could take over Boston and build a new (you

should excuse the expression) Jerusalem.

Meanwhile I love and I miss you more than I can possibly tell. In a vacuum the true emerges and this, in every sense that includes the personal, is a great fucking vacuum.

I suck tigers for you every evening.

Love

Jack

P.S. My phone number is La 3-0669 in case you get drunk and decide to phone. Send your new one in case I do the same.

Dear Allen,

You obviously didn't get the two letters I sent you in January (which is no great loss), but did you get the Tiger? That is the only way I can growl my love over all this distance.

The job is wonderful. It is so exactly what I enjoy doing that it frightens me. Boston is rather unexciting in its people but makes up for it somehow. It's a bit like being in Europe would be, I think. The faults and the idiocies are seldom American.

I'm not sending you any poems until I'm sure of them. You're too important. I'm now revising my *Baachae* and writing an incredibly confused thing called *The Unvert Manifesto and Other Papers of Oliver Charming Found in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library*. It started as a joke for my soldier but it's taken hold of me.

You haven't sent me the poems. Do so at once. If you drop out of school again, why not think of coming to Boston? You're not going to write poetry seriously unless you're near me or meet somebody like me. I wouldn't have if I hadn't had three solid years of Duncan. I have enough money to support you until you find a job. What in Christ's name do you want of the English Deparment anyway? I could see Ginsberg as a professor, but not you.

There are only a few of us in the world that speak Martian. We must love one another and keep together.

My hand in your hand,

Jack

P.S. How did Mike McClure look with his clothes off? I have a theory that poets who use rhyme schemes have no meat.

Emily didn't.

J.

Dear Allen,

Just got your new letter. You've got everything assbackwards. One doesn't have a vision and then write poetry. It's just the opposite. One writes poetry and creates a vision. Life *follows* art. Until you learn that you're going to keep on chasing your own tail.

A vision isn't something that comes to you when you're picking a nose or sucking a cock. A vision is something one patiently creates, panting all the while from the exertion. Poets make it look easy, but it isn't.

When a vision is created, people are transformed by it. Even though you haven't read *Troilus*, it has created a large part of what you are. The apples at Brandywine were not there until they were invented.

Sure your poems are short and bitter and probably now unimportant. Well, let them grow, for Christ's sake. Give them room. Learn to make a lie into the truth.

To sum it all up, this ain't the sort of thing you're going to learn from Bogart. You're going to learn it from your own poems or you ain't going to learn at all.

I still think you ought to come to Boston.

Love

Jack

Dear Allen,

Good poem. Cut out stanzas two and three and it's better. You would get there, I think, if you had guts (or madness) to give yourself to poetry. This is good because it's you and there's no shit to it. I'd publish it if I had a mag. What would be the real would be if it said something you didn't understand and there was no shit to it. Giving yourself to poetry is like giving yourself to alcohol—most people can't or are afraid. I've given myself to both. So can you.

Don't invoke me. Find me (or get someone else to find me) a job, and I'll come to San Francisco the next day on a plane or a broomstick. I've just had too much insecurity this past year to take the risk of being long jobless again. Anyway I'm no bloody Henry II coming back to Canossa to kiss the Pope's toe.

I'm working an a wonderful play—*Sir Orfeo*, with King Arthur and the forty thieves. Boston at least has been good for my writing. I'd rather write it in Berkeley though.

Read, if you haven't, Brinnen's Dylan Thomas. The poor cat was in love with him and it's the most painful and wonderful document written by an asshole that I've ever read. I cried three times—once when I discovered that Thomas (who I still don't think is a good poet) played pinball. Read also the new Pound Cantos (I'd love to read 'em to you at five in the morning) and Giradoux who everyone else discovered before I did.

I will send you some photographs of myself soon, but it won't really be as sadistic an act as yours was. I'd missed you so much I'd forgotten that I missed your body too.

Love

Jack

Dear Allen,

It is the middle of a blizzard and I write you important news. I have decided to come back. I throw down this challenge—whenever I definitely have a job to come to (next week or next year), at that time I will pack my bags and leave

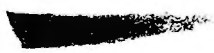
the East forever. I surrender completely, unconditionally, and happily.

Start praying for me. Start any magic that is still working, working for me. Inform the pinball machines for me. Write on every lavatory wall: MARTIANS ARE COMING HOME.

This is the most important news since the fall of France.

Love

Jack



NOTES

CORRESPONDENCE

REVIEWS

THE ACADEMY IN PERIL: *William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA*

The occasion of Williams' 100th birthday celebration at the professional conference of American literary scholars is an appropriate one in which to evaluate the inroads that Williams' poetry and poetics have made in the official literary culture of the United States.

Williams, more than almost any other American poet of his time, took an activist position in respect to the place of poetry—his work is an intervention within the culture against static forms of knowledge, against schooled conceptions and traditional formulation. Williams vociferously rejected the predominant academic forms of writing he confronted: verse fiction masquerading as

Presented at "Poets' Centennial Tribute to William Carlos Williams," Modern Language Association convention, December 29, 1983, New York. Italicized passages of the text are quoted from Williams' *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (NY: New Directions, 1974).

poetry and logocentrism claiming the rights of "philosophy and science." *The only real in writing is writing itself. . . . To transcribe the real creates, by the same act, an unreality, something besides the real which is its transcription, since the writing is one thing, what it transcribes another, the writing a fiction, necessarily and always so* (p. 13). Taking Stein and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* as cases in point, Williams insists *writing to be of value to the intelligence is not made up of ideas, emotions, data, but of words in configurations fresh to our senses* (p. 17).

What characterizes the officially sanctioned verse of our time, no less than Williams, is a restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form. In Williams' terms, writing like this is *used* to convey emotions or ideas rather than allowed to enact them. This is the kind of writing Richard Tillinghast recently extolled in *The New York Times* (5/1/83): "Mr. Halperin is expert at appealing to the senses in order to create convincing illusions of reality . . . all is comfort and contentment—a mood that predominates in this very readable book. . . . Good wine and well-prepared food are frequently at hand . . . . This is pleasingly done." Tillinghast, who surprisingly enough is listed as teaching English literature at Harvard (I thought he must be with Club Med's continuing education division) goes on, in an aside, to condescend to John Ashbery, rebuking him for too much "verbal sleight of hand, bedazzlement for its own sake," concluding his review with some stock sentences that Williams found tiresome a half-century ago—" in jettisoning the attempt to accomplish what is commonly known as 'making sense,' also cut their ties to any traditional notion of form, thereby obviating a satisfying resolution." Says Williams, *all* traditional notions of form, unless they can be "de-formed," are not "*used* but copied." They preclude "invention" by *anchor[ing] beyond the will . . . not liberat[ing] the intelligence but stultify[ing] it—and by . . . cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed* (p.17).

The divisions in our literary culture threaten to continue to make inaudible the bulk of Williams' work, and that of his contemporaries and those who continue in his spirit. As Williams passes through the narrow and well-guarded gates of official verse culture, it likely will be at the expense of so decontextualizing and neutralizing his work that it will be unrecognizable on his own terms. I say this because official verse culture is no more hospitable to Williams' literary politics now than it was fifty years ago, though the name William Carlos Williams—signifying in some cases only a few of the man's tamest poems—is no longer being ignored since to continue such a visibly adversarial practice jeopardizes

the authority of official verse culture itself. Faced with an author who writes that poetry's function *is to re-kindle language, to break it away from its enforcements, its prostitutions under all other categories . . . Thus Jefferson said, Liberty to be preserved requires a revolution every twenty years* (p. 20), the response has been to ignore the "rhetoric" and "draw the line" at Williams, continuing to bypass the many relatedly heterogenous currents in American writing and in Williams' own writing. In the end, Williams may be a token inclusion in a cannon that excludes what he stands for.

This schism in American literary culture cannot be adequately explained by allowing official verse culture the mantle of the academic or the traditional—mantles I think Williams was too quick to cede in his tendency to identify the dominating strains of "philosophy and science" with these subjects as such. Of course, official verse culture is housed and boarded by the academy and drapes itself in the veils of traditionalism. But as is evident from Tillinghast's review—and analyzed in Eliot Weinberger's amusing account of Frederick Seidel in *Sulfur* #1—official verse culture is more a celebration of middle-class, middle-brow lifestyle than a continuation of those literary and humanist traditions that have something more at stake. For instance, Williams has done more to further the prosodic tradition than any of his so-called more traditional contemporaries by *not* replicating received forms and *not* voiding an audible acoustic dimension from his poetry. Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed defenders of the tradition have abandoned it by repetition: love requires not miming but response, continuation, new acts inspired not beholden to the old. *It is to divorce from the enslavement of the prevalent cliches that all torsions (Stein, Joyce) have occured; violent in direct relation to the gravity and success of their enslavements. Language, bearing this relation to the understanding, is the care of [persons] of letters . . . Does it not occur to someone to stress the reality of the word—as distinguished from the things which the word engages and which kill it finally?* (p. 143)

Let me be specific as to what I mean by "official verse culture"—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times, The Nation, American Poetry Review, New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus, Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically-motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through

prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly-focussed, frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or non-partisan views. In this category, the American Academy of Poets and such books as *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* stand out. (Any so-called guide to American poetry that amidst citations of about 170 poets in its poetry sections [commenting here only on the older poets in the book's purview—it is even more shameless in the breadth and blatency of its omissions among subsequent generations] doesn't even *mention* the writing of Stein, Reznikoff, Eigner, or Mac Low, that merely lists the names of Zukofsky, Oppen, and Spicer, and that hurries over H.D., Loy, and (Riding) Jackson in the same half-paragraph while going on to lavish page after page on the usual suspects, even while extolling Williams, doesn't have a clue about American literature or Williams.)

Official verse culture is not mainstream, nor is it monolithic, nor uniformly bad or good. Rather, like all literary culture, it is constituted by particular values that are as heterodox, within the broad context of multicultural American writing, as any other type of writing. What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding. At any moment its resiliency is related to its ability to strategically incorporate tokens from competing poetry traditions and juggle them against one another while leaving for itself the main turf. These other traditions—which are usefully, if necessarily only partially, mapped in several of Jerome Rothenberg's anthologies—flourish outside official verse culture often by setting up institutions of their own. Within a context that would include Williams, a few are university-affiliated (*Sagetrieb, Credences, boundary 2*), some (like Williams' publisher New Directions) are independently successful, most are poet-run and transient.

Williams has written persuasively about polarization within American literary culture within the context of his irascible opposition to conventional education and rationalistic scholarship. While these issues are conceptually separable, for Williams they share the common ground of the academy. This fact is particularly important for Williams scholars, who, finding the object of their studies believes "the more you learn the less you know" can choose to ignore the resulting dilemma only at the risk of losing their subject.

A solution might well be what Williams calls the "humanization" of knowledge—where abstraction would give way to "enplacement" as scholarship acknowledges its material base as writing. In contrast, deconstruction, which is quickly becoming the dominant critical style of academia, is not the answer. Indeed, Williams would have had little to learn from our American deconstructionists, for there is little that they have said that is not better said by Williams in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* and *Imaginations*, or for that matter by Thoreau or Dickinson, whose much more radical critique of logocentrism has led them not to theatricalize absence but rather to take that critique as a starting point of a project of building meaning, "embodying" it, in Williams' phrase, to make it our own, owned. *In writing there are depths to be sounded as deep as any sky—as material, as full of value* (p. 129). The deconstructionists are flailing their hands at the starting line of a race they know shouldn't be run without quite realizing that this new drama provides the only interest this race has anymore, since the race track itself has long been abandoned by the descendents of its master-builders and only schoolchildren frequent the place as part of field excursions organized by their emeritus professors. The histrionic attempts to stop the race gather huge new crowds to the stadium because they remind the nouveau audience of a time when the stadium was full in its own name and they miss that and so come to see a reconstruction so that it can be demolished. No wonder deconstruction has found so little use for poetry not content to reject Origin and Voice, poetry, that is, which takes as its task finding and inhabiting origins and voices. Such work goes unnoticed because it fails to engage the nostalgia of the crowd.

What Williams insisted on was that no theory has any value except as enacted in a practical or particular context—for a writer, a text; that writing has its own exigencies that can be ignored only at the risk of saying what is not meant. Indeed, his insistence on no ideas but in things is not only a now-familiar critique of transcendental formulas removed from historical material circumstances but an attempt to formulate a practice of *embodying* a knowledge not grounded in the abstract universals of logocentric "science and philosophy" but in the language practices of living, i.e. *invented*—communities. *It is unescapable that on this, enplacement of the understanding, everything else rests, every action, thought, system* (p. 133). Williams, at 100, is heard but not listened to.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secret of Saint Elizabeths
E. Fuller Torrey
McGraw-Hill, 1984.

On May 24, 1945, Ezra Pound arrived at the Disciplinary Training Center slightly north of Pisa on the road to Viareggio. He had been driven there, handcuffed to another soldier accused of rape and murder, after spending three weeks at the Army Counter Intelligence Center in Genoa. During his detention in Genoa he had been allowed to give an interview. The story appeared on May 9th in the Philadelphia Record and the Chicago Sun. In it Pound describes Mussolini as "a very human, imperfect character who lost his head." Hitler he calls a martyr and notes, "Like many martyrs he held extreme views." There is a certain vertiginous quality in his remark that if he is not shot for treason he thinks his chances of seeing Truman "are good."

In preparation for housing him at the DTC the army had specially reinforced one of its wire cages or "death cells," as they were known. It measured six by six and a half feet and was ten feet high. E. Fuller Torrey reports:

> There was a cement floor and a tar-paper roof. All body wastes had to be deposited into a tin can. Once a day he was given something to eat. The cage was open to view on all sides, and at night a special reflector poured light into it.

While Pound waited in the cage the government collected documents to build their case of treason, gathering papers from his Rapallo apartment and records from the Ministry of Popular Culture in Rome.

After two weeks in the cell Pound apparently had a breakdown, suffering from memory loss, hysteria and bouts of "violent terror." On the recommendation of two camp psychiatrists he was then transferred to the relative comfort of the camp medical compound. There he had an army cot and a table and access to the dispensary typewriter. He was able to resume work on the Pisan Cantos. Torrey recounts the breakdown episode with skepticism. For him, the psychiatrists' intervention would appear to be the first in a long series of cover-ups and misuses of psychiatric testimony. After Pound's transfer to St. Elizabeths, an

''old boy network'' (including Hemingway, Frost, Eliot, Lowell, MacLeish, James Laughlin and others) would coordinate in an effort to keep Pound from trial and possible execution, and ultimately to free him. They would be abetted by the superintendent of St. Elizabeths, Dr. Winfred Overholser, who oversaw the Pound case and managed the recommendation that the poet was mentally unfit to stand trial. Throughout the St. Elizabeths years Overholser and Pound maintained a friendly relationship, and Torrey offers evidence that the psychiatrist routinely bent hospital rules to accomodate Pound's needs. It is Torrey's well-documented contention that during these years Pound showed no evidence of psychosis, that he was afflicted with nothing more than his own chronic egomania and ingrained bigotry. Torrey offers further evidence that this was the judgement of staff psychiatrists, but that by tacit agreement the arrangement was maintained.

Torrey actually builds two cases. The first is against Pound the human being, and much of the book is devoted to amassing evidence of Pound's lifelong racism and anti-semitism. A good deal of this is already known and documented of course, but Torrey offers access to many suppressed and/or forgotten writings as well as to uncensored correspondence that leaves no doubt concerning the darker side of Pound's character. The second case concerns the ethics behind the effort to spare Pound. Torrey seems to feel that Pound should have been brought to judicial account for his actions, and that he was let off the hook because of his special significance as an American poet. Torrey himself demonstrates very little understanding of that significance, and herein lies one of the book's several flaws. Torrey's knowledge of the modernist movement is almost entirely second and third-hand. In confronting Pound's poetry he relies rather carelessly on the comments of various critics. He is at best bemused by it all and at worst settles for predictably mindless evaluations. Somehow he manages to conclude that ''Pound's adoration of the abstruse'' was a source of his popularity. That is, Pound appealed to a generation of snobbish intellectuals in love with ''obscurantism for its own sake.'' We might well ask what ''popularity'' he is referring to. As Torrey himself rather contentedly notes at several points in his narrative, Pound's work was generally ignored in his lifetime by the critical establishment, and the work appeared sporadically in small editions. At least until the forties his major outlet was the little magazines, to which Pound contributed an astonishing range of poetry, translation, reviews, articles on economics, poetics, music, etc. For all the egomania there is his crucial and consistent support of, among others, Joyce, Eliot, Hemingway, H.D., Williams, Zukofsky and Bunting. Torrey acknowledges these efforts yet fails to account for them in assessing Pound's character. He accuses Pound of

careerism both in his bohemian show-boating and in his fascist affiliations. Were this true it might prove that Pound actually was insane, since his oddities of character were guaranteed to alienate genteel society, and he maintained his fascist beliefs long after it was publicly safe to do so. In effect, he held to a lost cause when many more cautious pro-fascist statesmen, artists and publishers had learned to shut up. I am also unconvinced by Torrey's description of Pound's life at St. Elizabeths in the later years as "idyllic." Visitors give the impression that it was better than might have been expected, but still no more than manageable. In his vitriol (acquired from Pound?) Torrey seems disappointed that Pound was not made to suffer more and that he was saved by his friends. In Torrey's view even the Bollingen prize was engineered as part of the plot to free Pound rather than as an acknowledgement of his poetic achievement.

In searching for "the roots" of Pound's "treason," Torrey has constructed the portrait of a deluded and contemptibly bigoted human being whose failure of vision is too mean-spirited to qualify as tragic. Yet Torrey neglects to analyse cogently the central paradox represented by the Pisan Cantos themselves. At his best Pound produced work both daring and luminous whose profound influence on the course of American writing is beyond question. He helped broaden our cultural range to include Chinese and Japanese poetry, the troubadours, Propertius, Villon, Cavalcanti and Dante. It is the paradox of poetic insight combined with bewildering political opprobrium. To view the problem in any depth one would have to ask exactly what attracted so many significant writers to fascism. What historical and ideological forces were at work? Torrey seems unaware of the question's complexity.

That there was an effort to keep Pound from standing trial is certainly not new. That it was abetted by Overholser is Torrey's discovery. Understandably Torrey views the professional ethics of this action with anger and alarm. To my mind the accomodation was a humane subterfuge under the circumstances. It seems to me fortunate that Pound was able to continue his work and, finally, to experience a degree of self-knowledge and remorse at his failings. Is this sense of charity, shared by many, in part the result of Pound's stature as a poet, and thus reprsentative of a double standard? Perhaps.

MICHAEL PALMER

DADA DATA

("One was free to go and stand on another man's shadow.")

Excerpt from J.H.M.C. Boelaars, *Headhunters about Themselves: An Ethnographic Report from Irian Jaya, Indonesia* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, pp. 67-69.

Here follows a list of notes about the various parts of the human body.
1. The hair, *muku-rumb*, was paid attention to when somebody was ill and during the age ceremony for the children. In both cases the hair was shaved off but in the latter case replaced by ornaments. The hair of a captured head was used to decorate spears and to make waist-bands, *qowa* for the great head-hunters.
2. The face might be painted for celebrations. They made use of a butterfly pattern, *rur-dokāk*. By painting the parts around the eyes in bright colours the eyes looked like the black dots on the wings of a butterfly.
3. The eyes, *kind*, may represent a person as is stressed in the advice: "The wedding sago should be given under the eyes of the sun, *tapaq-kind-kan*."
4. The ear is associated with using one's brains. A stupid person is a person without ears, *mono-ain-mbēk*. The expression *mono-koame*, there is an ear, means, "we too are able to think."
5. The nose, *tamangk*, was specially adorned by pieces of a shell and claws of birds. *Tamangk qana*, hard nose, is a sombre and determined face.
6. The mouth, *mèm*, is always associated with eating. *Mèm rènggèmbak*, big mouth, does not refer to an impudent person but to a glutton. The mouth has a special function in the custom of taking a mouthful of water and sprinkling this over the face of a person who has lost consciousness. The gestures of putting out one's tongue or of spitting on the ground in front of somebody's feet are insults, which lead to fights. The tongue is also said to be a delicacy (just as is the ball of the thumb) for cannibals.
7. Shrugging one's shoulders was not an expression of ignorance but of fear. In the presence of men, women may stand together with hunched shoulders as a token of decency, but the men know better. They say, "If they were alone with a man, they would all too much like to have sexual intercourse."
8. Chin rubbing or nose rubbing, as among the Asmat, is not a Jaqaj custom of greeting. They used to lay their right hand in the left hand of the other, who then clasped the first man's fingers. Men kiss each other

on the cheeks but do not kiss any women, not even their own wives. Women usually do not kiss one another.
9. Breath is not associated with the notion of spirit. Breathing proves that somebody is still alive.
10. Women adorn their upper arms and the place between the breasts with scarifications. The girls gladly suffered any pain in order to have these marks. The men are greatly interested in the breasts, *abur*, and in the size of the female genitals, *jo*. The women in turn gossiped about the bellies, *kandöm*, and the anuses, *mo*, of the men. These parts of the body always turned up in my list of words of abuse.
11. Children were not allowed to touch the inside of their mother's thighs. The "inside of the thighs of his wife" was the place where the ancestor *Kapaqait* took the seeds for planting vegetables. The pubic hair of women and the fibres of their perineal bands were smoked in the peace pipe. They said that the hymen should remain untouched until after the first menstruation. Sperm and urine could be used as medicine. The myth of *Ujoqot* relates how he created a human being by smearing his sperm on a coconut.
12. The anus, *mo*, had a special cover, a tail, *èk*, of fibres. Whenever a man was ill, he would always ask whether he was lying decently. To touch a man's anus was either an appeal to his strength or a very serious insult. Breaking wind proved that one had eaten too much. If it happened in the presence of men only it did not matter, but in the presence of women, especially in the presence of one's own wife, it could be perilous for them or her. Women incurred the risk of being killed if they looked at the excrements of their husbands. Husbands feared their endless reproaches about eating too much.
13. The penis, *paqadi*, or the pubic hair of a man drew less attention. They did not wear any shame cover. The term *paqadi*, penis, was often heard as an expletive. The most stupid thing a person could do, they said was to hurt his own anus or penis.
14. The fluid oozing out of a decaying corpse was not used for any special purpose. The only thing that happened after a corpse had decayed was that children were told to trample the ground where the burial platform had been. This was done so that they might become the worthy successors of the deceased.
15. Body odour, especially that of the armpits, was believed to have a special defensive power against spirits. A person's shadow did not get any attention. One was free to go and stand on another man's shadow.

Notes:

1. I am grateful to Renato Rosaldo for bringing Boelaars' list to my attention. "Borges," he said, "could not have improved on this one."
2. Malinowski was interested by what he called the "coefficient of weirdness" in cross-cultural descriptions. It had always to be balanced, however, by the "coefficient of reality." Other ways of life should be made real and comprehensible while at the same time preserving a sense of their strangeness and difference. One way of preserving this strangeness was to include data not fully contextualized—random, odd facts, "imponderabilia." Realist ethnographies, Malinowski thought, should maintain a productive balance between the coefficients of weirdness and reality, leaving readers to circle hermeneutically (happily) between plausability and surprise, coherence and small bits of data. But the interpretive balance sometimes slips; and when it does, the image of the other disintegrates into partial collections of facts and juxtaposed statements from heterogeneous sources. The listing, selecting, sorting processes by which certain kinds of information emerge as significant become suddenly visible.
3. Ethnographic lists tend to induce reverie, the way Joseph Cornell's partitioned "hotels," "habitats," and "museums" do: birds and clocks, star-charts, ballbearings, pipes, body-parts. . . . An unexpected beauty can be found in classifications, or in sentences like: "The fluid oozing out of a decaying corpse was not used for any special purpose." "To touch a man's anus was either an appeal to his strength or a very serious insult."
4. Boelaars was a missionary-ethnographer and linguist (Father of the Sacred Heart) for nearly ten years in Indonesian New Guinea.
5. Ethnographies generate multiple readings. For example, Trobrianders are free to read Malinowski's accounts of their culture as parodies. And by selecting out individual sentences from any cultural description one can easily produce series like Boelaars'.
6. When the "coefficient of weirdness" floats free from the "coefficient of reality" the result is a new sort of exoticism. The strangeness that's produced does *not* inhere in the culture or world of the peoples represented. This exoticism is different from earlier varieties—romantic, Orientalist, and poetic. For what has become irreducibly curious is no longer the other, but cultural description itself.
7. "At 10 I went to Tegava, where I took pictures of a house, a group of girls, and the *wasi*, and studied construction of a new house."—Malinowski's Trobriand diary
8. What's called for, then, is an ethno(GRAPHIC)poetics. . . .

JAMES CLIFFORD

Poems
J. H. Prynne
Agneau Press, 1982.

In the legendary times of the Druid forefathers, Britain was Rome's frontier, its wild west of Celtic tribes. For J.H. Prynne it's a frontier now, again, a border to what lies in wait—in the future, but also in the ground, the water, the air, and the awesome potency man has arrogated for the purposes of his own history. Prynne has been patiently committing to paper, on this border, the impending condition. "Fire and honey oozes from cracks in the earth;/the cloud eases up the Richter scale." (p. 168)—so begins Prynne's elegy on Paul Celan, one of the most powerfully sombre elegiac poems in English in several decades. When Prynne closes the poem with the unsettling lines "Forbearance comes into the/stormy sky and the water is not quiet" the mood is sealed: a permanent cloud of strict, aching occupation and inhibition has settled in, the condition of the entire world a mood of war that doesn't end when the wars end.

In Prynne's work the ruthlessness of despoliation in all its forms has been injected like a lethal dose into the high sublime. The pastoral sub-strata of the idiom responds with its domestic inertia even to the trickle of poisons in the groundsprings. With a fitful sputter Comus has staggered to 1984, dripping with dioxin, no longer able to "Drink the clear stream" as Milton had it. To which Prynne, opening the blind man's eyes: "It is not possible to/drink this again, the beloved enters the small house." (p. 168) The beloved in the small house is an old image whose fecundity has been subtly poisoned and set in the jaws of the trap on a pretty plate. But, as it appears in another poem, "Treatment in the Field,"

> We burn by that echo. It is called love like a wren hunt,
> crimson ice, basal narcosis. By deep perjury
> it is the descent of man. (p. 214)

Here in a flash, Darwin's descent and Adam's fall are suddenly the same.

J.H. Prynne has disrobed the true mode of the high sublime in an astonishing variety of ways. The mood is generally apocalyptic ("And midnight ploughing/on the high field, what grandeur/will save us now." (p. 255)—yet the clinical

evidence and the laboratory report are meticulously attended to throughout. A diagnosis is not forthcoming. Yet the high sublime is reanimated in Prynne's work by the very fact that diagnostic moments recur, often transient as a single line but which, in reading, literally give you pause.

Prynne's mastery of so many moods, coupled with his skills as bricoleur (it's not clear how much of the work is collage, but it often seems to be) leaves seismic contours in a rhetorical idiom as striking as Hopkins, as in the opening of "Again the Black Cloud":

> Shouts rise again from the water
> surface and flecks of cloud skim over
> to storm-light, going up in the stem.
> Falling loose with a grateful hold
> of the sounds towards purple, the white bees
> swarm out from the open voice gap. Such "treasure":
> the cells of the child line run back
> through hope to the cause of it; the hour
> is crazed by fracture. Who can see what he loves,
> again or before, as the injury shears
> past the curve of recall, the field
> double-valued at the divine point. (p. 228)

Following this, the poem goes through a cyclone of diagnostic and clinical details. This poem, with the others published originally as *Wound Response* (1974), is submitted to the scrutiny of the medical terminology that keeps erupting throughout, as if the poems themselves were ailing bodies under treatment. The poem "Of Movement Towards a Natural Place" for instance begins "See him recall the day by moral trace" yet by the second stanza has proceeded as if by direct incision:

> . . . Remorse is a pathology of
> syntax, the expanded time-display depletes the
> input of "blame" which patters like scar tissue. (p. 221)

Such austere lines and concepts run through these assembled poems with the peculiar radiance of a gasoline bubble in the sunlight.

In Prynne's work the language has become porous to alien and conflicting idiolects, reflecting (deliberately, I think) a comparable encroachment on organic forms by the fallible human element. It is a new mode of political poetry risen directly from the lining of the stomach, alert to the poison in every bite. Because Prynne is so capable in his native verse idioms, a poem like "A New

Tax on the Counter-Earth'' confidently holds up a pastoral moment only to let us see how quickly it wears under the added, and inescapable, politics (or life of the city) feeding on it.

> A dream in sepia and eau-de-nil ascends
> from the ground as a great wish for calm. And
> the wish is green in season, hazy like meadow-sweet,
> downy & soft waving among the reeds, the
> cabinet of Mr. Heath. Precious vacancy pales in
> this studious form, the stupid slow down & become
> wise with inertia, and instantly the prospect of
> money is solemnised to the great landscape.
> It actually glows like a stream of evening sun,
> value become coinage fixed in the grass crown.
> The moral drive isn't
> quick enough, the greasy rope-trick
> has made payment an edge of rhetoric;
> the conviction of merely being
> right, that has
> marched into the patter of balance. (p. 171)

This is a kind of balance like a see-saw, where the uppermost body feels most acutely the precariousness of gravity and the laws of motion. As the human species loads the opposite seat on its see-saw with garbage, its own ascent is exhilarating to some, vertiginous to others, but either way asking for a fall. Nonetheless, from that prospect—being literally raised, and with a certain vista—there is a euphoria, a being high, which Prynne has written inextricably into the sense of precariousness.

''. . . We have already induced/moral mutation in the species'' (p. 165) Prynne wrote in ''The Ideal Star-Fighter'' years before the cyclopean public eye ever gloated on Star Wars.

> Now a slight meniscus floats on the moral
> pigment of these times, producing
> displacement of the body image, the politic
> albino. The faded bird droops in his
> cage called fear and yet flight into
> his pectoral shed makes for comic
> hysteria, visible hope converted to the
> switchboard of organic providence
> at the tiny rate of say 0.25 per cent
> ''for the earth as a whole.'' And why

go on reducing and failing like metal: the
condition is man and the total crop yield
of fear, from the fixation of danger; in
how we are gripped in the dark, the
flashes of where we are. It pays to be
simple, for screaming out, the eye
converts the news image to fear enzyme,
we are immune to disbelief. (p. 164)

Prynne's readers must ultimately be Americans, for we are the open jaws immune to disbelief, craving spectacles of incinerated planets, drinking the broth of heedlessness induced by that moral mutation. The poet's labor is now "cognition by recount," in which "the homeric icefields unfold." (p. 223) Cold war and thaw are terms from our political predicament, yet Prynne has read these and other terms as poetic, dating from homeric icefields.

This is a poetry of authentic political power, gleaned from a rash of details and almost microscopic linguistic reflexes which, it appears, is beyond most poets writing in America, who still tend to write "political poems" no more sophisticated than electioneering talks on the primary trail. It comes as no surprise to observe, on the strength of this collection, that Prynne anticipated so-called "language oriented" poetry by many years, while still retaining the power of Protean—or post-Olsonian—vista and stride. Nor is it surprising to find that the prose "Note on Metal" might be read as an *ars poetica*, or that the hilarious "*Plant Time Manifold* Transcripts" be read as an utterly nihilistic epistemology (which you can hardly credit as possible until you read it). Prynne's unique amalgam of bitterness and cynicism with sheer sensual delight and humor is a watershed of poetic possibilities.

Poems is the most demanding single volume of poems I have attended to in the past year. It collects ten books and chapbooks from 1968-1979 (of which *Brass* and *News of Warring Clans* are perhaps the high points), with some 50 pages of additional writing. Any of the smaller books from that decade will have alerted readers to a formidable talent, but gathered together in *Poems*, Prynne looms very large among poets now writing in English.

JED RASULA

THE CASE OF AMY CLAMPITT: A READING OF *Imago*

The following paper was given at the Modern Language Association conference in New York (December 1983) as part of a panel on "Evaluating Contemporary Poetry" in which Cary Nelson, Ed Folsom, Charles Altieri, Charles Molesworth and I compared notes on our respective criteria for judging new poetry. Nelson spoke on Merwin, Folsom on Snyder, and Altieri and Molesworth addressed themselves to broader issues. Lively discussion from the floor followed. Members of the audience were given copies of the poems to be discussed. Clampitt's "Imago" may be found in *the Kingfisher* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, pp. 74-76).

Reviewer after reviewer has praised Amy Clampitt's *The Kingfisher* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) for its "richness in verbal invention and formal strategies" (Emily Grosholz, *Hudson Review*), its "complex linguistic lyricism" (Peter Stitt, *Georgia Review*), its "intricate patterning" (Joel Conarroe, *Washington Post Book World*), and, above all, its difficulty. In Helen Vendler's words: A beautiful taxing poetry."[1] Difficulty, density, metaphysical complexity, pithy statement—all these are, of course, New Critical criteria. I want to look closely at the highly praised Clampitt poem "Imago" and then to speculate on what the current wave of Neo-New Critical response to poetry signifies.

IMAGO

Sometimes, she remembers, a chipped flint
would turn up in a furrow,
pink as a peony (from the iron in it)
or as the flared throat of a seashell:
a nomad's artifact fished from the broth,
half sea half land—hard evidence
of an unfathomed state of mind.

Nomads. The wagon train that camped
and left its name on Mormon Ridge.
The settlers who moved on to California,
bequeathing a laprobe pieced from the hide
of a dead buffalo, the frail sleigh
that sleeps under the haymow, and a headstone
so small it might be playing house,

for the infant daughter, aged two days,
no name, they also left behind.

Half sea half land: the shirker propped
above her book in a farmhouse parlor
lolls with the merfolk who revert to foam,
eyeing at a distance the lit pavilions
that seduced her, their tailed child,
into the palaces of metamorphosis. She pays
now (though they do not know this)
by treading, at every step she takes,
on a parterre of tomahawks.

A thirst for something definite so dense
it feels like drowning. Grant Wood
turned everything to cauliflower,
the rounded contours of a thunderhead,
flint-hard. He made us proud:
through all those edges might not be quite
the way it was, at least he'd tried.

"But it has no form!" they'd say to
the scribbler whose floundering fragments
kept getting out of hand—and who, either
fed up with or starved out of
her native sloughs, would, stowed aboard
the usual nomadic moving van, trundle her
dismantled sensibility elsewhere.

Europe, that hodgepodge of ancestral
calamities, was hard and handsome, its rubble
confident, not shriveling on the vine,
as here, like an infertile melon—the Virgin
jejune in her grotto of cold plaster, half sick
of that sidelong enclave, the whispered "Cathlick."

Antiquity unshrouds on wimpling canvas,
adjunct of schoolhouse make-believe: the Italy
of urns and cypresses, of stairways
evolving toward a state of mind
not to be found except backstage
among hunchbacks and the miscreants
who control the scenery, flanked
by a pair of masks whose look, at even
this remove, could drill through bone:

the tragic howl, the comic rictus,
eyeholes that stare out of the crypt
of what no grownup is ever heard to speak of
but in the strangled tone whose lexicon
is summed up in one word: *Bankrupt*.

Bankrupt: the abysm of history,
a slough to be pulled out of
any way you could. Antiquity, the backward
suction of the dark, amounted to a knothole
you plugged with straw, old rags, pages
ripped from last year's Sears Roebuck catalog,
anything, to ward off the blizzard.

Not so, for the born-again, the
shuddering orifices of summer.
On prayer-meeting night, outside
the vestibule among multiple
bell-pulls of Virginia creeper,
the terrible clepsydra of becoming
distils its drop: a luna moth, the emblem
of the born-again, furred like an orchid
behind the ferned antennae, a totem-
garden of lascivious pheromones,
hangs, its glimmering streamers
pierced by the dripstone burin of the eons
with the predatory stare out of the burrow,
those same eyeholes. Imago
of unfathomable evolvings, living
only to copulate and drop its litter,
does it know what it is, what it has been,
what it may or must become?

Amy Clampitt herself, in a curious set of notes at the end of *The Kingfisher*, supplies us with the meaning of her title. She cites the American Heritage Dictionary:

> IMAGO. 1. An insect in its sexually mature adult stage after metamorphosis. 2. *Psychoanalysis*. An often idealized image of a person, usually a parent, formed in childhood and persisting into adulthood. (p. 142)

The Notes also tell us that the "merfolk" and "lit pavilions" of the third stanza

refer to Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, "The Little Mermaid" (which is evidently Clampitt's favorite fairytale even as it is mine) and that she connects this story to the geological fact (read in John McPhee's *Basin and Range* [Farrar Straus, 1981]) that in past eons the Iowa in which she herself grew up was covered by ocean, a fact that accounts for the land's peculiar sedimentary veneer and flat contours.

"Imago" is an 83-line poem written in stanzas of irregular length; the verse is, strictly speaking, "free" although its predominant rhythm is iambic, frequently even iambic pentameter as in "A thirst for something definite so dense. . . ." The chief sound devices are alliteration and assonance. The syntax is orderly: the first stanza, for example, is made up of one long sentence, with internal modification, draped over seven lines. These long packed sentences, broken by parenthetical asides like "from the iron in it," recall Elizabeth Bishop or the earlier Robert Lowell.

The first stanza has two similes—the chipped flint is "pink as a peony," or pink like "the flared throat of a seashell"—and a metaphor: the flint is "a nomad's artifact fished from the broth, half sea half land." The reference here is to the Iowa of the poet's childhood, which, as Clampitt's note makes clear, has its characteristic configurations because it was once under water. The introduction of the seashell, and the reference to "half sea half land" prefigure, of course, the allusion to the Little Mermaid which becomes explicit in the third stanza. But in case we've missed the point, the last lines of the stanza spells it out: the remembered flint is "hard evidence/of an unfathomed state of mind," or, we might say, the mind as mirror of the unfathomed ocean which is its primeval source.

All the images in the stanza "work," so to speak, and yet I don't quite believe in them. The "chipped flint," for example, conveniently turns up in the furrow not because its memory is in any way connected to the poet's situation in the present, but so that the land-sea imagery integral to the poet's theme may be introduced. When images from the past impinge upon our consciousness, we do not, I think, "remember" that A was like an unrelated B, a chipped flint like a pink peony. On the contrary, the comparison is willed, now, in the act of writing the poem. Indeed, Clampitt does not so much use language to recover a process of experience as she selects carefully those images and metaphors that will work together to make a well-crafted, orchestrated "reconciliation of opposites."

This makes for a good deal of contrivance. Consider the treatment of the land-

water tension in the third stanza. The poet refers to her childhood self in the third person as "the shirker." Evidently, in the eyes of others, she was *different*, "propped above her book in a farmhouse parlor." And now the story of the little mermaid is introduced. In the Andersen fairytale, we remember, the little mermaid falls in love with a mortal, a handsome prince, and in order to be with him gives up her natural habitat, the water in which she is at home in perfect innocence, and marries him. In order to do so she makes a pact with the devil in the form of a sea witch: she can have her prince only by exchanging her fishtail for legs, but every step she takes will be as painful as if she were walking on knives. At first, the pain seems worth the price, but then the prince begins to neglect the mermaid and falls in love with someone else. The mermaid is totally devastated, languishes, and dies, becoming foam and rejoining the ocean world. It is a tale with all sorts of implications: the clash of innocence and experience, mortal and immortal, and so on.

What does Amy Clampitt do with the mermaid metaphor? Like Andersen's heroine, Clampitt's poet decides to leave the safety of her "merfolk," and head for the "lit pavilions" of the civilization outside her "native sloughs." But the analogy is not convincing because, after all, the Iowa farm family is by definition of the *land* whereas it is the poet who ventures out on the dangerous waters of life. More important, these uneducated and simple farm folk can hardly be expected to see what has happened to their "tailed child" as a seduction to "the lit pavilions" and "the palaces of metamorphosis." Only the poet herself can see it that way. I find the attribution to the "merfolk" of thoughts they can't have irritating, a somewhat self-righteous put-down of these insensitive others who cannot understand her needs.

But neither, for that matter can the reader. For what are the lit pavilions and palaces of metamorphoses so portentously referred to? In the vocabulary of the New Criticism, which haunts both the writing and the reception of this poem, one would have to say that, alas, these nouns have no objective correlative. "She pays now (though they do not know this)," we are told solemnly, but we don't know what she is paying for. Has she run off with a lover? Been seduced by money? Fame? The intellectual life? "She pays now (though they do not know this)" has an aura of self-pity accentuated by the inept metaphor of the final lines, which find the poet "treading, at every step she takes, / on a parterre of tomahawks."

Parterre means (1) the level space in a garden occupied by flower beds, and (2) the part of the ground floor of an auditorium or theater that lies under a rear balcony." The second meaning is the more common and is, I think, Clampitt's

meaning here. The "mermaid," seduced to the Big City away from her watery primeval Iowa origins, walks forever on a parterre, the polished floor, say, of a theater lobby, feeling every step like the blow of an axe. But here the mermaid metaphor breaks down. In the fairytale, the mermaid cannot walk without pain because she was not meant to walk at all; the acquisition of legs is unnatural for her. By analogy, Clampitt's mermaid-poet is out of her element in the civilized world of the sophisticated city. What, in this context, do tomahawks have to do with her plight, what, indeed, is the relationship of her sensibility to Indian consciousness?

Cleverness, it seems is all. The callous Iowa "merfolk"—perhaps her school teachers—regard the struggling young poet as a "scribbler whose floundering fragments / kept getting out of hand." "Fed up or starved out of her native sloughs," she boards "the usual nomadic moving van" so as to "trundle her / dismantled sensibility elsewhere." It's a familiar story with vaguely Jamesian overtones. Europe, the Great Good Place, turns out to be a "hodgepodge of ancestral / calamities"; "the Italy / of urns and cypresses" (what else?) is no more than a sham: "Bankrupt the abysm of history, a slough to be pulled out of." How or why Europe is thus dismissed is anybody's guess but since we don't know anything about this girl except that she is, of course, sensitive and poetic, there is no way to assess Clampitt's statements about history, or about "Antiquity, the backward suction of the dark."

In any case, the painful memories of disillusion—disillusion with the so-called cultured world, whether in America or Europe, lead up to the final image of the luna moth, to the question of what might have happened to the poet had she chosen the sexual life rather than the life of the artist or intellectual. Why these two are necessarily opposites is not made clear. Helen Vendler writes:

> In the most hypnotic piece of writing in this strenuously written book, Amy Clampitt looks with a frightening intensity at the sexual evolution of the biological female. Her symbol for this purpose is the imago of the luna moth emerging from its chrysalis with all its terrifying lurid sexual apparatus of specialized evolution. The moth in its timing obeys the inexorable water clock, the clepsydra, of the biological imperative. . . . As a poem about the adolescence of the female, "Imago," with its look at the dreamy girl reading fairy tales leading to its violent stare at sexuality marks a new stage—speculative, brooding, and powerful—in the poetic mirroring of female experience.

The question, I suppose, is whether that "violent stare at sexuality" really takes

place here. Vendler admire the rich variety of Clampitt's sources—history for "clepsydra," Psyche's myth for the moth-as-soul, zoology and botany for fur, fern, orchid, and antennae, anthropology for totem, the laboratory for pheromones (the substances secreted by insects to attract the opposite sex), and so on. Yet this glut of allusive properties brings us no nearer to the ostensible subject of the passage: what with the terrible clepsydra of becoming (one can't read the word "clepsydra" today without thinking of John Ashbery), and the totem-garden of lascivious pheromones (the notes tell us this is a reference to Lewis Thomas' *Lives of the Cell*), we lose sight of the plight of the mermaid-poet who has to walk on a parterre of tomahawks. I would argue that what Vendler calls "the purely biological life" is never a real option: the extremities between which this women runs her course are the hard-edge Grant Wood farmhouse parlor, on the one hand, and the unspecified "lit pavilions" on the other. It is all very well to dredge up out of this glacial drift the symbolic image of the luna moth but nothing that we know about the poet (and of course we know almost nothing) relates to that image. We are, in other words told that the biological imperative is an alternative of sorts but the preceding stanzas have given us no particular reason to believe that this is the case.

Clampitt, that is to say, has loaded every rift with ore to the point that the rifts themselves are safely ignored. We are given so much detail about the sexual evolution of luna moths that we all but lose sight of the central reality of the poet's own sexuality. Who and what is she? How do we place her in her Iowa farm background? To what extent has she become another person? We don't know because the "she" who is perceived by her people as shirker and scribbler is no more than the stereotypical portrait of the artist as sensitive young girl, alienated from her incomprehending Grant Wood family circle. Why "she pays now," why she must suffer so much, why the "hodgepodge of ancestral / calamities" which is Europe is no more satisfying than the "native sloughs" of Iowa is not explored. Nor do we have a vivid sense of what it is this Little Mermaid wants in life.

Clampitt's, we are told, is a poetry "rich in verbal invention," in "geographical and literay texture," it is "dense," 'metaphysical," "difficult." But this so-called "difficulty" like the "difficulty" of much late New Critical poetry, is more apparent than real. "Imago," like most of Clampitt's poems has a definite theme alright: it is "about" the alienation of the poet caught between two worlds, two imagos. Thus there is nothing ambivalent about the poet's "merfolk"—callous types who are given short shrift as just so much Grant Wood hard-edged cauliflower.

The reader's "difficulty," then, can only be one of translation: Question: what does the luna moth dropping its litter symbolize? Answer: it symbolizes a purely biological state of being that the poet both envies and knows she can't have. And so on. Everything here will yield to "translation" provided one uses one's dictionary and encyclopedia. Given this emphasis on translatability, I take the Amy Clampitt cult as a sign of our current nostalgia for the good gone days when POETRY WAS ABOUT SOMETHING, when it conveyed (1) complex emotions, preferably contradictory; in (2) elegant poetic language, and (3) never said anything directly that could be said indirectly. Poetic Diction, I'm afraid, is once again with us as it was in the late eighteenth century and again in the late nineteenth.

A redolent air of *fin de siècle* hovers over the poems in *The Kingfisher*, a book perhaps most clearly understood as a reaction to two prominent strains in post-modern poetry. The first is the "directness" and "spontaneity" of sixties poetry—whether Beat, New York school, the San Francisco Renaissance, or the Midwest Nature poetry of Wright or Bly. *The Natural Words in the Natural Order*—the Yeatsian dictum of the young century as it was of Wordsworth's Preface and as it was at the beginning of the eighteenth century for Swift and Pope is now a formula regarded with suspicion: telling it straight is considered the ultimate gaucherie in Clampittland. And secondly, the cult of Clampitt is a reaction to the mysteries of John Ashbery, of Neo Dada and Surrealism, of concrete poetry and sound poetry, of minimalism and performance art. I am frequently asked whether I really think that writers like John Cage or David Antin, whom I included in my book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, are poets: after all, they don't use striking nature images as does an Amy Clampitt; they are often perfectly "direct"; they do not use recogizable verse forms, and worst of all, they seem to express almost no personal feeling, no attitude, say, to parents or lovers.

Such writing is bound to be disconcerting, especially when it suggests that we discriminate at our peril between "poetry" and "prose," between "lyric" and "narrative," when it implies that parody and play are just as "valuable" as the high seriousness of an Amy Clampitt. The Arnoldian need for what Eliot called "spilt religion" continues to haunt us.

By now, my own prejudices are obviously showing. I suppose I am finally too much of a Poundian to appreciate Amy Clampitt's "terrible clepsydra of becoming." I firmly believe that one should not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Think about this axiom in relation to *Imago*:

is this particular topos—the alienated childhood, the urge to overcome it, the disillusionment that comes with age—Made New by the heavy metaphoric, allusive, and alliterative overlay it is given in Clampitt's poem? Again, as a Poundian, I believe that the poet should use no adjective that does not reveal something. Does it help us to visualize the chipped flint to be told that it is "pink as a peony"?

Perhaps there is finally no substitute for *le mot juste*. In the opening poem of *The Kingfisher*, we read that the "eiders" (large ducks) "trig/in their white-over-black as they tip/and tuck themselves into the swell, almost as though diving under the eiderdown/in a *gemütlich* hotel room at Innsbruck." Beautifully descriptive, critics call this sort of thing. I find myself cringing at the last line. Not only because Innsbruck arouses a stock response—a sort of *Sound of Music* lederhosencum-yodelling scene in good old Austria—but because of the inaccurate usage of the word "gemütlich." *Gemütlich* happens to be an adverb; the adjective is inflected: *gemütlicher, gemütliche, gemütliches* as in in "Ein gemütliches Zimmer" (room). To put the adverb in front of the noun "hotel room" thus strikes me as a false note, a coy attempt at familiarity as if to say "Oh, you know about those cozy eiderdowns in those hotel rooms in Innsbruck." As it is, it is merely cute and Baedeckery; moreover, it adds nothing to our vision of the ducks diving under the sea swell. In Pound's vocabulary, the image is excessively "viewy." It is not direct treatment of the thing.

But, someone is sure to ask me, how can you talk of direct treatment of the thing when you have written a book in defense of the Other Tradition, the tradition of undecidability and indeterminacy, of unreal cities? I would say in response that any poem sets up its own network of expectations, its own conventions. In, say, Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, now available to us in the Clayton Eshleman-Annette Smith translation, we know from the very first refrain line, "Au bout du petit matin," that we are embarked on a hallucinatory journey, that the "real" world must be transformed. But Amy Clampitt's poetry is essentially quite mimetic: it makes statements, applies judgements, displays particular prejudices, all the while pretending that these statements cannot be made straightforwardly. Metaphor, as we learned it at school, is here decorative rather than integral. One could omit "pink as a peony" or "as though diving under the eiderdown/in a *gemütlich* hotel room at Innsbruck" and still have what is basically the same poem. Try the same exercise on, say, an Ashbery poem and you will see the difference: indeed, you won't be able to determine what images are "more" or "less" important because Ashbery does not hierarchize them; there are no culminating symbols

like the luna moth, symbols that claim to center, to ground our experience.

And this is, for me, the heart of the matter. *The Kingfisher* is a book that yearns for origins, for a logocentric universe. Given the realities of the world we actually live in in 1984, such yearning is bound to produce a responsive chord in the Literary Establishment. But can we step in the same New Critical River twice? "What does not change," as the poet said, "Is the will to change."

1. *New York Review of Books*, March 3, 1983, p. 19.

MARJORIE PERLOFF

ANSWERS FOR WILLIAM CORBETT

(re: "Questions for Hayden Carruth," *Sulfur #8*, following my review of Jim Harrison's *Selected & New Poems* in *Sulfur #7*)

I did not include the "honest, beautiful, important poems" by Ruthven Todd, Byron Vazakis, and Reuel Denney in my anthology because they were not sufficiently honest, beautiful, or important to compete with poems by others who were these poets' contemporaries. The anthology was intended to be as representative as I could make it of the best American poetry published between, say, 1910 and 1968, which was when the table of contents was closed out. This means only very few poets from each decade, obviously. Do I need to say that editing an anthology is different from editing a magazine or a current booklist? The one is a work of history and is strict; the other is a work of the present and takes chances. My anthology contains misjudgments, of course, both of inclusion and of omission, but these were not a result of inattention; I studied the work of *every* poet from the period in question whose poetry had any serious claim to be included, with one exception. I was shocked to see, when I looked through the table of contents in the printed book, that I had forgotten Melvin B. Tolson, and I have been disturbed by that ever since.

If a revised edition of the anthology were to be undertaken—for various reasons it won't be—I would change little in the first half. I would add Tolson, I would try to find an extra page for Ransom and another for Bogan, and I would probably struggle again to make room for some of those who were the last to be dropped in the final cutting, such as Léonie Adams. I would make many changes in the second half, and progressively more toward the end. I would revise the selections from a good number of poets who, like Jim Harrison, have done better and more extensive work since 1968 than was available to me before then. I would drop a few poets and perhaps add a few others. But I would not try to include poets who have come to notice since 1968, because I now believe it was an error of judgment in the original anthology to bring the table of contents up to a date as close as possible to the date of publication. What little was gained in contemporaneity was more than lost in superficiality.

Most of your questions are answered fully in the anthology's introduction, which I invite you to read. The rhetorical questions in your final paragraph are more difficult, however: I don't know what you mean them to convey. Apparently they have to do with trust. But did I ever ask you to trust me? The idea that an author or editor becomes, by virtue of the publication of his work, the reader's servant has some merit and should be taken into account, but you cannot push it far without destroying the author's or editor's integrity, as we see now in the way packaged anthologies and textbooks clog our former channels of interintellectual exchange. No, I offered the best I could do, in free competition with many others. If you don't like it, William Corbett, why don't you just say so?

HAYDEN CARRUTH

Axe Handles
Gary Snyder
North Point Press. 1983.

Since the 60's platoons of young poets have imitated Gary Snyder, adoring him with the fervor they bestow on Rock Stars. Some even change their names to Moon Dance, Sun Bush, Basting Spoon, Axe Handle, Little Elk. Many turn up at his northern California acres to imbibe creativity, to drink manzanita tea, to eat their granola al fresco amidst the raccoons, skunks, and possums. At a

wave from Snyder, they would gladly lick the sweat off his sauna, or stand guard all night against the wee ringtailed beasties demolishing his outdoor kitchen. Perhaps he might, in return, zap them, like a hearty Mr. Natural, with all manner of talents, real and imagined.

Obviously, a poet isn't responsible for his imitators. But the traps exist in Snyder's work, as they do for few other contemporary poets: a surface simplicity which the imitators misread; his reportage; the spare, no belly-flab style. The difference between Snyder and the followers is that when Snyder takes a sauna, it's an experience; when the acolytes do it's merely a bath.

So much by way of preamble. The occasion for this piece is the appearance of Snyder's first book of poems in almost ten years, *Axe Handles*. How have the years treated Snyder? Pretty well, I'd say. Despite a few limp efforts (included are throwaway poems about Jerry Brown's visits to Snyder's yurt, nature and trivia, and Snyder's role on the California Arts Council), some of these poems rank with Snyder's best. There is a quieter, mellower tone throughout than we find in much of the earlier work; and he now writes of what he scrutinizes before him, without much reminiscing. It's as if the passing years have made the immediate experience more valuable than ever—a deeper delving in the earth itself as a means to awareness.

* * *

"Getting in the Wood" is vintage Snyder. His trademarks are all here: 1). the effortless, non-sentimental beginning. The phrases, shorn of their definite articles, are subtle ink-strokes on the page. They possess an odd, marvellous tactile quality. Here is the event of the poem: Snyder gathers wood-rounds which have lain aging on the forest-floor, and splits them with an iron wedge driven by a sledge-hammer. The poem opens as easily as a greeting, evoking a quick mix of smell, color, and the kineticism of spurting water

> The sour smell,
> blue stain,
> water squirts out round the wedge. . . .

2). Argot from the trades, from the survival arts. These ("peened," "wedge," "axe," "peavey," "maul," etc) he employs with a zest like that of Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sonnets to Welsh laborers. Here Hopkins glories in the physique and skills of a ploughman ploughing a field:

> Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldish flue
> Breathed round; the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank

Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barelled shank—
Head and foot, shoulder and shank—

. . . .

He leans to it, Harry bends, look. Back, elbow, and
liquid waist
In him, all quail to the wallowing o' the plough:
's cheek crimson; curls

Wag or crossbridle, in a wind lifted, windlaced. . . .

What Hopkins and Snyder say (also see Hopkins on the variegated colors of loam, in "The Windhover") seems to be something like this: if you aren't meticulously observant of physical details, you miss important signs for spiritual growth. Details become symbols. In such namings Snyder fuses both his Zen Buddhism and his American pragmatism. Tu Fu and Thoreau.

3). The concentrated evocations of the senses: how the skin feels as sweat drips, the smell of "crushed ants," the sounds of wood tumbling, the cantering sledge emitting the ring of "high-pitched bells." Snyder is a poet of the synaesthetic effect; he is as often as esoteric, I feel, as Baudelaire or Swinburne charging poems with highly orchestrated dynamic sense-fusions. On one level, Snyder is a pure art-for-art's sake poet. And I love him for that.

4). The incredibly compact music created as Snyder joyously names tools, or details of flora and fauna. These moments create exciting verse music. Here is one passage, highly cadenced, accentual, rampant with raw energy—Snyder is in full control:

Wedge and sledge, peavey and maul,
little axe, canteen, piggyback can

of saw-mix gas and oil for the chain,
knapsack of files and goggles and rags. . . .

And a bit earlier, this:

. . . the complex duff of twigs
poison oak, bark, sawdust,
shards of logs,

And the sweat drips down.

5). The celebration of human effort as intense energy spent towards both survival and spiritual growth (what I call the John Muir Syndrome: see Snyder's

poem to Muir in *Rip-Rap*). Here, with a relish again reminiscent of Hopkins (one of the latter's favorite words was "delve"), Snyder's "young men" make wood, four cords of it:

> the young men throw splits on the piles
> bodies hardening, learning the pace
> and the smell of tools from this delve
> in the winter
> death-topple of elderly oak.
> Four cords.

Their pride is their *arete*, that old Greek word for a skill superbly employed. Here the unerring skill of the woodsman, as well as the excellence of his tools matter. There are again echoes of Hopkins' sprung-rhythm in the alliterative design, the lovely stress on liquid sounds, and the avoidance of the regular iambic line. The enjambments are subtle, and the long-vowel music contributes much. The second line, in its design of trochees and dactyls, and its telling caesura, is akin to Hopkins' more original devices, ones that reach back to Anglo-Saxon accentual verse. "Four cords" is a neat tying-off, a closure for the sophisticated passage.

In lesser hands, Snyder's truimphs over the physical worlds of forest and machine, rendered almost with eyelids peeled, might seem silly, a phony primitivism engendering a Grease-Can School of Poetry, or, as I have called it elsewhere, Ugh-Poetry. This verse Snyder himself avoids through his zestful music, which at times almost serves to make the meanings of his words superfluous. We must struggle against enjoying these pure effects too esoterically—we would miss the didactic intentions beneath nearly all that Snyder writes. Isn't such purity of effect, though, what most good poets aim for? an avoidance of sermonizing? a transcendence of raw materials?

Another poem, "Working on the '58 Willys Pickup," includes matter appropriate for a Whole Earth Catalogue (how to mulch your sterile ground with sawdust, gravel, and chuff so as to make it fertile):

> Now to bring sawdust
> Rotten and rich
> From a sawmill abandoned when I was just born
> Lost in the young fir and cedar
> At Bloody Run Creek
> So that the clay in the garden
> Can be broken and tempered

And growing plants mulched to save water—
And to also haul gravel
From the old placer diggings,
To screen it and mix in the sand with the clay
Putting pebbles aside to strew on the paths
So muddy in winter—

Finally, the old truck is repaired:

The rear end rebuilt and put back
With new spider gears,
Brake cylinders cleaned, the brake drums
New-turned and new brake shoes . . .

Snyder congratulates himself on a "tough-handed" job well-done, and looks forward to reading Chinese philosophers that evening.

In "The Cool Around the Fire," Snyder prunes underbrush to allow for more growth the following year. He labors in a season of drought and imminent forest fires. He meditates on his labors, equating them with "heart" and an emergent "cool" that elevates his spirit. The result, arising from surface simplicities of diction and cadence, again suggest brush-strokes, signs for the transcendental:

Burn brush to take heat
    from nest summer's wildfires
    and to bring rain on time,
    and fires clear the tangle.

    the tangle of the heart.
Black coffee, bitter, hot,
    smoke rises straight and calm
    air

Still and cool.

Brilliant techniques in themselves do not, of course, constitute a whole poetry. Tone matters too, as does theme. The pragmatic, self-reliant voice so characteristic of Snyder never appears as a pushing or a bullying of the reader—in his best poems, he never overtly urges us to march, axes in hand, out to enroll in woods-survival courses, or to build our personal leantos, saunas, yurts, and field-kitchens. Like John Muir and Thoreau, his mentors, his experiments are his own (Thoreau never intended that anyone else live his experiment, to stake a claim at Walden Pond, plant beans, or eat woodchuck raw). Snyder's experiments in living are uniquely his. Yet, while he does not propagandize, the life he

creates, evokes, and describes is so appealing that we also feel welcomed to join in, creating the ecosystem he envisions. He plants his own apple-seeds. And his self-reliance is one of his most attractive strengths. His awe/respect for nature, for spirituality, for each human life, drops almost casually, at times with touches of humor and gentle ironies, often at his own expense. Those who choose to pick his apples may. Feel free, he seems to say. But you'll have to use your own ladders and pails, and your own hands, not his.

Another dimension is thematic. A lesser poet would be content merely to record their quests after the mythic omphaloses of the universe. Snyder's framework is far more ambitious; he is always a mere breath away from universals. There's a poignant continuity, he feels, in all human experience, from the remotest primitive ancestor to the squalling, puking infant emerging from the uterus at this very second. His efforts to create a self-sustaining ground-earth-house for his family echo the efforts of an ancient Oriental grubbing for his existence, physical and metaphysical. In an unforgettable image, Snyder describes a prehistoric woman seen in a Stockholm Museum:

> Knees up in an easy squat
> your body shows how
> You gave birth nine times:
> The dent in the bones
> in the back of the pelvis
> mother of us all,
> four thousand years dead.

This bone-dent connects us to our ancestors. Our life is "quick," Snyder observes, followed by a "long slow/feeding" of time, symbolized by a "woodpecker's cry." Life-death is a simulacrum of sorts. The "corruption, decay, the sticky turnover" we witness everywhere, passes into eternity, as a form of "glacial rubble,/crumbling rocky cliffs and scree." Snyder's tenacity, his faith in his immediate time-locked experiences as their smoke flows towards the transcendental, his love for the earth (one ecosystem for all) provide inspiration for those of us lacking his gifts and his trenchancies. All this, of course, is quite other than the beauty of his writing; his themes and techniques are a rare fusion for these times. By imagining Nature as a "sweet old woman" who gathers her firewood (the Heraclitean fire?) in the moonlight, he celebrates his life and reassures us about our own.

ROBERT PETERS

UNEARTHING THE VAMPIRE

We imagine there was an historical Count Dracula. We take tours of the historical Dracula's castle in Transylvania, or read some of the concoctions of vampire lore that have appeared over the past decade. But there was no Count Dracula. What's more, the Hungarians did not take vampire lore any more seriously than theories on the curative powers of garlic. Certain figures were remembered with vampiric odium, like Vlad the Impaler, or the Bloody Countess Bathory. A few magistrates had been attacked by anonymous vampires—no Transylvanian Iliad, no cosmogonic heritage.

Popular culture creates a wall between fiction and the sources of fiction. In the past decade, a vampiric history has been sewn together—the vampire as Volk—in the work of McNally, Florescu, Wolf and others. We pursue tourist images of the exotic, and begin to make the source resemble our fantasy, much the way pulp novels about the American frontier—invented by dime novelists from New York and Philadelphia—became the canon of the Wild West.

Tourism brought the word vampire to Western Europe, and travel books kept the notion of the historical vampire alive (undead?). In 1732, an English gentleman, trying to include Hungary in the Grand Tour, mentioned vampire lore in an article for *London Magazine*. Voltaire, after his exile in England, apparently brought the term back to France, citing it in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. Thereafter, except for a few studies of magic, like the work of the Abbe Calmet (1741), vampire entered literary imagery, and everyday businesess parlance (i.e. the vampyre bookseller of eighteenth century London).

Vampire has always meant "blood-sucker" businessman, as well as haunted corpse (even in Rumania and Hungary). The Hungarians borrowed the term from the Turks, probably during the Turkish occupation (1526-1683), and probably as an anti-Turkish superstition; in that sense, vampire became part of the Hungarian liberation movement. A Greek Orthodox businessman who consorted with the Ottoman infidel was blasphemed as a vampire, and would rise hideously from his grave, begging for a Catholic soul. He might be joined by dead enemies of the Inquisition, or by suicides buried at the crossing of a road.

In England, beyond the elegant uses of the term by Southey and Coleridge, the first vampire appears in the short story by John Polidori, in 1819. Polidori's Count Ruthven was modeled on Lord Byron, and is very much the scoundrel that audiences imagined Byron was. To exploit the public's enthusiasm about Byron as *The Vampyre*, an opera was hurried to London in August, 1820, *The Vampire or the Bride of the Isles*. The plague of literary vanpires had begun, in thousands of performances, for generations. In time, the trap door that served for the mysterious exit of gothic monsters of the night, in a gaslit mist, or sulfurous smoke, came to be called simply, a vampire.

There were national differences in literary vampires. The French versions, for example, were far more sultry, and exotically penitent. Gautier's lady vampire seduces a young student, and takes him backward in time to ancient Greece: a classical vampire, if you will.

Clearly, in England, the vampire tale was developed far more elaborately than in France, and engaged many political and social questions of the day. There lies the authentic vampire, in the ambiance of London street crime and Jack the Ripper. We may find a few medieval or Hellenistic vampires, but the historical "vampyre" (or Vampir) barely exists beyond the English fabulation.

To find authentic vampires, we need go no further than the cruel phobias of nineteenth century England. And the novel *Dracula* is the fulfillment of the vampire legend, a *summa* of Victorian misbeliefs (and whatever medieval ones Bram Stoker could locate at the British Museum). Here we find the vampire on his original soil, as a product of Victorian superstition (it is said that nothing makes a better consumer item then popular superstition). Using Dracula as the culmination, we uncover three categories, all linked clearly to the Victorian economy, and briefly as follows:

The Dying Aristocratic Class: like the devouring beast in Durer's *Apocalypse*, the vampire is a plague visited upon the common man. He is a decayed aristocrat, like Carlyle's description of landed nobility: "A High Class without duties to do is like a tree planted on precipices; from the roots of which all the earth has been crumbling."

He is a vengeful parasite, lying in the remains of his estate. To Carlyle, these aristocrats hid ominously behind the iron spiked gates of their castles, provoking strange myths. They were not unlike the Viscount de Moriève described by Dudley Wright, a monstrous aristo who was so enraged by the French Revolution that he cut off the heads of his retainers. And then, after the peasants stormed his castle and killed him, he rose from the grave, a vampire. For

seventy-two years, he attacked, and killed the peasants' children. Finally, his grandson had the coffin opened, and found the viscount's body frightfully intact. The vampire, a bloated reminder of feudalism, was destroyed.

Legends of perverse aristocrats inspired Delacroix's *Death of Sardanopolis*, or Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, among hundreds of examples. To foreshadow the incest between Roderick and Madeline Usher, and the death of the family line, Poe describes the estate of Usher with melancholic irony: "It was this deficiency, perhaps of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission from sire to son, of the patrimony of the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher'—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion."

In the case of France in 1789, we must remember that the Great Fear at the start of the Revolution was provoked by rumors throughout the country of vengeful aristos bent on massacre. Aristos were pagans; they exercised their sexual privileges ruthlessly (the deflowering of virgin brides on their wedding nights, a bizarre prerogative that led to the first child in many peasant homes being called "the seigneur's bastard"). They were beyond the law, and in a sense, beyond the reach of God Himself. Even during the Reformation, or the English Revolution, or the evangelical moments of the eighteenth century, such were the messages. These superstitions about aristocratic perversity are reenacted in gothic tales, in legends of aristocratic sloth. Sumptuary fantasies of the same sort obsess Balzac's social climbers, like Philippe Bridau or Rastignac—or become *dances macabres* in Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*. As Carlyle warns his readers: "Gracious Heaven, my brother, this that thou seest with those sick eyes is no firm Eldorado, and Corn Law Paradise of Donothings, but a dream of thy own fevered brain . . . so many stories from the street."

This feverish dream of poisoned aristocratic lines is central to *Dracula*. Transylvania, as the "land beyond the forest" (borrowed from the travel book of that title, by Emily Gerard), was once a vital kingdom, but had become "a soil barren of holy memories." Dracula's homeland is unobtainable, beyond the reach of British diplomacy, even Britannic gunboats. Jonathan Harker cannot even find it on Ordnance maps in the British Museum. It is so primitive that even modern medicine cannot cope with it.

The Spermatic Economy: This term is used by historian Ben Barker-Benfield, to describe one of the more bizzarre superstitions of Victorian America and

England. Many physicians assumed that anemia was caused by excessive loss of sperm (with symptoms precisely like those of a vampire's victim). Blood and sperm relied upon each other in their bodily functions.

Bram Stoker was apparently haunted by this very same crisis of "vigour" (an oft-repeated term in *Dracula*). The causes, according to his grandnephew Daniel Farson, were a sexless marriage, leading to itinerant wandering, and later, venereal disease. Whatever the reasons, he shared the Victorian sense that sex (or excessive sex) was like a Malthusian nightmare, a threat to the scarce resources of the body. His vampire killers, called the Victorian Committee, are fighting a lustful and draining Lucifer. Even Stoker's lady vampires (always described as "voluptuous," and soulless) can threaten the bodily fluid balance. As Dr. Van Helsing approaches the coffin of Lucy Westenra, now a "voluptuous" vampire, "the sperm (from his candle! as in spermacetti) dropped in white patches, which congealed as they touched the metal." The coffin becomes the extension of her vampire body, of its power. Dracula is even more powerful. Like a Symbolist Lucifer or Salome from Redon, Moreau (or even Munch's flame-haired vampiress), Dracula is sexually omnipotent; he is replenished by the sexual act, but at what an unnatural price!

Imprisonment: Perhaps an even more complex superstition of bourgeois culture has been the sense of madness as a crime, associated with what Foucault has called "the Great Containment." In summary, as hospitals and prisons were increasingly controlled by bourgeois officials (of the eighteenth century), the mad are mixed in with criminals, and treated as emblems of sloth, bestiality, and in a peculiarly reverse sense, liberation from bourgeois self-control (as in Romanticism). They possess in excess what Baudelaire would call "natural opium."

So it was with vampires, imprisoned by their illness, as uncontrollable as madmen. Like Poe's imprisoned heroes, or the tortured Roderick Usher, the vampire must live out the sin of madness, and infect the innocent. Either they are penitent in the end, like Varney the Vampire (novel of 1847), or are shamelessly evil forces of nature—Dracula—but their pinnacles of madness are the key scenes in a vampire tale (i.e. the vampire's stare, the rape of the victim).

Allied to this notion of madness and imprisonment is what Foucault has summarized as the "theater of punishment," the ways that medieval rituals of violent punishment were internalized in bourgeois culture. By the nineteenth century, public executions and ritual torture were considered immoral and generally forbidden in Western Europe. Prison was a private affair, between

the prisoner and his conscience, if you will—on behalf of the public good. From Hogarth's *Four Stages of Cruelty*, and Piranesi's *Carceri*, to Kafka's *The Penal Colony*, prison is equated with conscience. Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872), a wood engraving of convicts circling in the exercise yard at Newgate prison, inspired Van Gogh to do a painting about confined madness. Instead of a public event, punishment becomes a sign for the imprisoned unconscious. Foucault feels that the vanished medieval and Renaissance spectacles of punishment are replaced by popular fiction, where the exotic barbarity of public execution is treated as a sort of dionysian ritual. We should not take this to mean only scenes of public execution in fiction, or film, but more broadly as the motif (or formulas) of victim and executioner.

In this sense, the vampire tale is a mythic version of the breaking at the wheel, or the hanging (many of the covers of penny dreadfuls throughout the nineteenth century, by the way, illustrated the news accounts of killings or executions, to identify to the reader that a gothic tale was inside). First the vampire is the executioner (of conscience?); then he must become the victim, like an *auto-da-fe* followed by the trial of the Grand Inquisitor himself. It is not as much the play of justice as ritualized punishment, an interior dialogue.

The vampire's threat becomes a passion play about industrial and medieval superstitions in conflict. Which supersitions shall solve the dilemma, and save Miss Mina? Will those myopic city folk leave garlic around her room at night, as Van Helsing advised, or will they prattle on about modern science? And finally, in the twentieth century, these Victorian superstitions become a peculiar kind of natural history, in work by Ashley Mantagu or Dudley Wright. I am reminded of Harvard phrenologists measuring craniums to find the skull of a criminal brain, as ghoulish a taxonomy as Poe or Kafka could dream up. Or as Nietzsche wrote about the actor, we are vampires of our unconscious. Once again, all history is contemporary, the crab who looks backward while he marches forward. The congeries of vampirana are so complex, one can only be impressed by the imaginative lengths to which we go to blend audience culture with folklore to invent the diachronic. Today, crowds gather outside Dracula's castle in Rumania (or is it at the Universal Tours?); each person is holding a map of Dracula locations that never existed. Could anything medieval match a scene like that?

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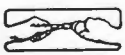

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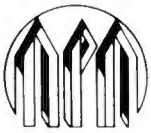

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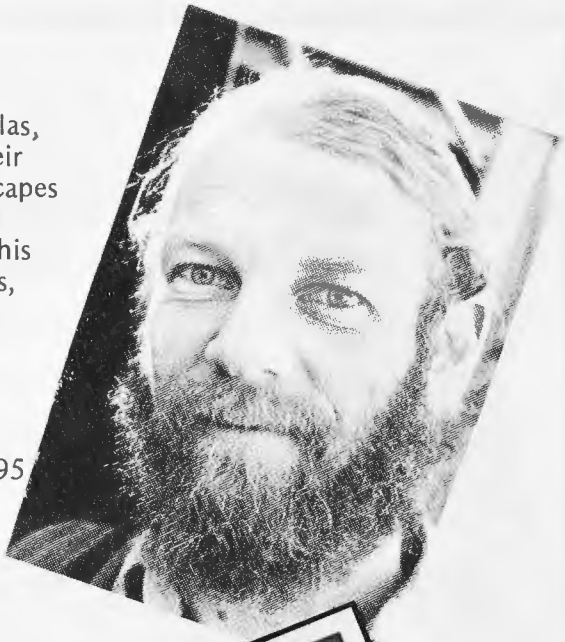

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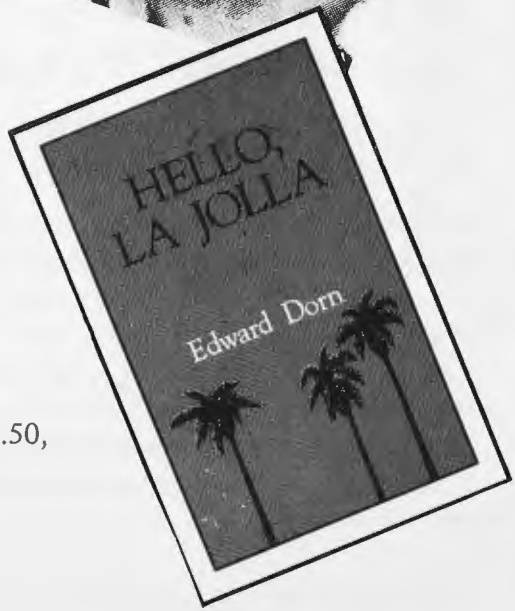

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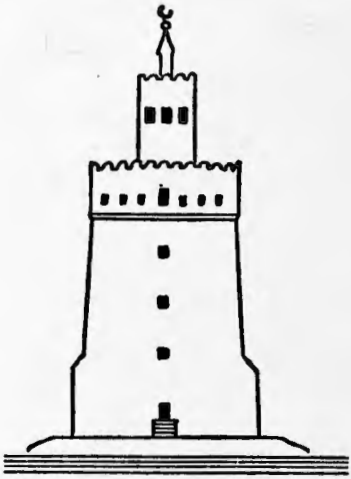

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